ENGLISH BITES!

My Fullproof English Learning Formula

MANISH GUPTA

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ENGLISH BITES!

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Dear Zeliha,

Happy reading!

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

To
My parents
My wife Deepali
My sister Ruchi
My parents-in-law
My daughters Tamanna and Prakriti
Aspirants of CAT, XAT, GRE, GMAT
and
Students from the vernacular medium

CONTENTS

1.	Punjab Engineering College, Chandigarh	1
2.	Borrowings from Sophomores	23
3.	Discovering Mnemonics	55
4.	My Friend Avinash	72
5.	The Tata Nagar Wheeler Dealer	87
6.	Pursuit of Excellence at XLRI	119
7.	Capital Square	143
8.	Tummy Tuck	171
9.	Coffee and Conversations	205
10.	My Rendezvous with English	228
11.	Dr Pandu Piplani	237
12.	Conjugal Subjugation	284
13.	Family Expansion	300
14.	My Material Has Run Out	328
Acknowledgements		331

1

PUNJAB ENGINEERING COLLEGE, CHANDIGARH

On the face of it, all was going well for me at school. It was a five-minute walk away but we preferred to cycle the distance in under two. The school advertised itself as an English medium school, the only one to do so in my neighbourhood. Those were the 1980s and our parents were beginning to appreciate the role of **proficiency**[1] in English in gaining economic prosperity. The fact that their kids studied in a convent—a word that had come to mean a 'good' English medium school—was casually slipped into conversations but hadn't yet acquired the **exalted**[2] status of **precipitating**[3] distress in those being conversed with.

[1] **Proficiency** means skill or expertise: *It took several years of practice before Sam achieved proficiency in music.*

[2] **Exalted** means (1) raised or elevated, as in rank, character, or status; (2) noble or lofty: *an exalted style of writing*; *an exalted dedication to liberty*; and (3) exaggerated or inflated: *he has an exalted sense of his importance to the project.*

[3] **Precipitate** means (1) to make something happen quicker than it normally would, bring about prematurely or suddenly: *He precipitated a*

This school was located in the small, sleepy town of Rohtak in the north Indian state of Haryana. Our teachers had grown up studying in the **vernacular**[4] and were likely to break into their mother tongue for topics that did not strictly fall within the boundaries of the course. It worked well for us as there was no real pressure to learn to converse in an alien tongue suited merely to the narrow world of academics.

Our English teacher, Mr Verma, was different though. He destroyed our **fragile**[5] confidence with pleasure and lowered our self-esteem to levels where we couldn't even face ourselves in the mirror. Over time and after a lot of effort, we got better. We finally mastered the art of combing our hair without stealing even a glance at the looking glass!

Mr Verma would ask us to provide him with a list of our extracurricular interests and randomly call three students to make short speeches before the rest of the

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batting collapse by varying his bowling style; (2) to cast, fall, plunge, or send, especially violently or abruptly; to fall, fling, or throw from or as if from a great height; to throw headlong; to hurl down: *he precipitated himself into the struggle; an ailing economy that precipitated into ruin despite foreign intervention*; (3) in chemistry: to separate (a substance) in solid form from a solution, with a reagent; and (4) in meteorology: to fall to the earth's surface as a condensed form of water; to rain, snow, hail, drizzle, etc.

[4] **Vernacular** is the native and everyday language of a place (from Latin *verna*, 'household slave').

[5] **Fragile** means (1) easily broken, shattered, or damaged; delicate; frail: *a fragile ceramic container; a very fragile alliance*; (2) vulnerably delicate, as in appearance: *she has a fragile beauty*; and (3) lacking in substance or force: *a fragile excuse*.

class on any of those topics. Each morning was spent in **fervent**[6] **exhortations**[7] to the almighty and this continued till the selection of the three lambs for the day was done.

There were enough days in a year when all our prayers and promises came to nought, and I was pulled up right to the front. I would experience a sudden loss of all confidence, courage, and fluency and stammer away at 'Playing with my pet dog Rambo and my pet cat Lucy' or 'How to win at Monopoly and marbles' or 'Kitchen gardening techniques of grafting to multiply English rose plants and cacti' and so on.

We tried to console ourselves that while the medium of instruction in our school was English, the medium of understanding, memorizing and responding was the vernacular. In other words, we thought in the vernacular and then translated our thoughts into English when asked to explain something in class. Naturally, this took longer than normal conversation would—without the advantage of fluency, we were often left **groping**[8] for the appropriate English words to adequately describe

[6] **Fervent** means having great warmth or intensity of spirit and earnestness of feeling, enthusiasm, etc.; passionate, dedicated: *a fervent admirer; a fervent plea*. It also means hot, burning or glowing.

[7] **Exhortation** means using a speech to urge or encourage someone with strong argument, scolding, earnest advice, or appeal: *the captain exhorted the troops to hold the line*. It also means to give urgent advice, recommendations, or warnings.

[8] **Groping** means (1) searching blindly or uncertainly: *He seemed to be groping for an answer to the question*; (2) to feel about with the hands or feel one's way about: *I had to grope around in the darkness before I found the light switch*; (3) (slang) to touch or handle another person for sexual pleasure.

our thoughts and ideas. These **frenzied**[9] efforts at quick translations were exhausting, and I can't even begin to describe the relief of getting back into the comfort of the mother tongue during lunch breaks and small gaps between classes, when the next teacher was slightly late and we had a few moments of freedom.

Expectedly, my skills in all departments of the English language—speech, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation—were limited to the academic aspects of life. Good academic performance at school ensured that I could opt for the sciences stream in Class 11. By this time, my sister Ruchi, who was four years younger to me, had successfully **weaned**[10] herself off her passion for table tennis and **plunged**[11] into the pursuit of academic excellence.

[9] **Frenzy** means a state of extreme mental agitation or wild excitement. It also means a fit or temporary spell of madness or delirium, a mania, a craze: *The homeless and hungry went into an eating frenzy at the Christmas dinner organized by the church for all.*

[10] **Wean** means to make a child or young animal not want to suckle the mother for food but get used to other food: *A baby should be weaned off the mother's milk gradually*. It also means to withdraw (one's affections, one's dependency, etc.) from some object, habit or form of enjoyment. As a phrase, 'wean on' means to make someone accustomed to or familiar with (as if from childhood): *a brilliant athlete weaned on a diet of high-quality protein*; *British kids weaned on rock music by the early 1960s*.

[11] **Plunge** means (1) to cast, fall, or throw oneself into a liquid or a penetrable substance; to descend steeply; to fall precipitously: *to plunge a dagger into one's heart*; (2) to bring suddenly or forcibly into some condition, situation, or matter: *to plunge a country into war*; *to pull a switch and plunge a house into darkness*; (3) to throw oneself earnestly into an activity or situation: *Two months before the final examination, I plunged into my studies*; (4) to suddenly become lower; decrease dramatically: *Stock prices plunged during the banking crisis*; and (5)

This led to a small conference at home attended by close family and friends. The mission was to decide which of the two teenagers would earn the privilege of staying longer at home, and which one would move to a hostel after Class 12. It was agreed that if there were one engineer and one doctor in the family, we could become more self-sufficient at repairing human bodies and home appliances, should they decide to malfunction at any time.

There was no engineering college in my city though it was full of professional institutions, especially medical colleges devoted to all treatment **modalities**[12] such as allopathy, ayurveda, and homeopathy. Since I had managed to lower my average science score in my matriculation examination, thanks to poor marks in biology, I readily volunteered to explore the freedom of hostel life in an engineering college outside my beloved city.

And so it was, at Punjab Engineering College in Chandigarh, in the second phase of my academic career that I came across several long-suffering specimens of my species. We shared our sorrows, **empathized**[13] with one another, spoke a common

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to rush or dash with headlong haste: *to plunge through a crowd*. To 'take the plunge' means to begin an unfamiliar venture, especially after hesitating: *After a seven-year long courtship, they are finally taking the plunge and getting married this summer*.

[12] **Modalities** are forms, protocols, or conditions that come before formal agreements or negotiations: *The proposal for assignments across the globe was so inviting that he immediately began to work on the modalities of the contract*. In medicine, a modality is a therapeutic method like surgery, chemotherapy, or radiotherapy that involves the physical treatment of a disorder: *The newly launched hospital offers all three modalities for the treatment of cancer*.

[13] **Empathize** is to experience the feeling and thoughts of others vicariously: *Given that I had experienced a similar setback a few*

language and bonded well. And we could not help noticing other specimens, individually blessed by the **enshrined**[14] deity of the English language. They spoke so fluently in this foreign tongue, at times using words and expressions alien to us, that we felt like children of a lesser god.

Some of these ladies and gentlemen were also rather **enthused**[15] with the Western concepts of life and extremely keen to pursue higher studies in the **hallowed**[16] halls and laboratories of American universities. Others, who wanted to gather material riches and climb corporate ladders, dreamt of management courses in elite management institutes in India or abroad.

I certainly did not want to be left behind. Even before ragging season had ended, I started to gather information from seniors on management institutes in India and overseas. I sought out ways to make it to the **Holy Grail**[17]—

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months ago, I can truly empathize with you. **Vicarious** is a feeling felt or enjoyed through imagined participation in the experience of others. It also means something performed, suffered or received in place of another: *vicarious punishment*.

[14] **Enshrine** means to enclose in or as in a shrine: *his love for her is enshrined forever in his poetry*. It also means to cherish as sacred: *the memory of our friendship will forever be enshrined in my heart*.

[15] **Enthuse** means to be or become enthusiastic; show enthusiasm: *all the neighbours were enthused about the new policy*.

[16] **Hallowed** means holy, sacred, or venerated. This word draws a lot on Christian theology and there are common prayers such as 'Our Father who art in heaven / Hallowed be thy name' that frequently use this word.

[17] **Grail** is a cup or chalice that, in medieval legend, was associated with unusual powers, especially the regeneration of life, and was much sought after by medieval knights. In informal usage, the phrase

any reputed institution in the US. I soon found out that the latter meant taking tests called GRE (for MS) or GMAT (for MBA). And clearing these tests depended, to a large extent, on one's proficiency in English vocabulary, reading comprehension and grammar.

On the advice of my seniors, I made a quick trip to the bookstore in Sector 11 market and purchased *Barron's GRE*, a popular guide book. Charged as I was, I began in right earnest to cram its innumerable word lists. Little did I realize that I had to start learning English from scratch. The more I crammed, the **piteously**[18] less English I seemed to know!

How confusingly similar some words appeared to be! Such confusion between *cavern–tavern, mannequin–manikin, plaint–pliant, childish–childlike, jaunt–jaunty, esoteric–exoteric, underline–underwrite, geminate–germinate, idle–idyll, wriggle–wiggle* . . . My head swam and my heart sank!

And this was just the beginning. I was in for a ton of nasty surprises. For instance, I **encountered**[19] some strange words that had more than one meaning. You may **retort**[20] that there are several such examples in English. It is, after all, a language

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'holy grail' refers to any greatly desired and sought-after objective; the ultimate ideal or reward: *MIT is considered the holy grail of research in the field of engineering.*

[18] **Piteous** means evoking or deserving pity; pathetic: *piteous cries for help.*

[19] To **encounter** means to meet someone or something unexpectedly: *a chance encounter in the park*; to confront in battle; or to come up against: *encounter numerous obstacles.*

[20] **Retort** is to reply, usually in a sharp or retaliatory way: *she quickly retorted, 'we were busy cleaning, no one has had time to cook'.*

that has travelled and evolved a great deal, rapidly taking in words and concepts from other cultures. However, unlike the usual instances of multiple meanings for a particular word, these strange words had multiple meanings that were *exact opposites* of each other!

Take the word *cleave*. To adhere closely to or to follow faithfully is what it means. Strong-willed people can be expected to *cleave* to their principles in adverse times. However, the word also means to part, split, cut off, or divide! So, one can *cleave* a branch from a tree.

Which meaning is correct? More important, how does one know which of the many meanings is correct in a given context? Looking back, I realize that much of the confusion was caused by similar sounding words and also by subtle differences in the *enunciation* (pronunciation, articulation).

As I learnt new words, I discovered more of these **contronyms**: *moot* is 'debatable' (capital punishment is a moot point) and also 'not worthy of debate' (that the earth revolves around the sun is a moot point). *Consult* is to 'ask for advice' (he consults the doctor once every six months) and also to 'give advice' (he consults for several multinational corporations on their China and India strategies). *Custom* is something that is 'usual' (in India, it is a custom to touch the feet of elders as a sign of respect) and also 'special' (the Bentley was custom-made for the son of a rich industrialist).

The list goes on: *scan* is to 'examine carefully' (the doctor scanned the reports for any evidence of **relapse**[21] of

[21] **Relapse** means (1) to fall back into illness after convalescence or apparent recovery; (2) to slip back into a former state or practice: *to relapse into silence*; and (3) to fall back into vice or wrongdoing; backslide: *to relapse into drugs and smoking*.

cancer) and also to 'quickly glance through' (he scanned the newspaper headlines while eating breakfast). *Sanction* is to 'approve' (the law sanctions the use of force in special circumstances) as well as to 'boycott' (*The country was unable to purchase life-saving drugs because of the sanction imposed by the United Nations*). Similarly, *screen* is to 'show' (they screened a classic film at the club) as well as to 'hide' (they screened the President by surrounding him on all sides). And then, *dust* is to 'remove fine particles' (she dusted the paintings) as well as to 'add fine particles' (she dusted the cake with sugar)!

I figured out that the general rule of language is that when, by some **freak**[22] of evolution, a single word develops two radically opposite meanings, one will become **obsolete**[23] over time. Occasionally though, both meanings do survive. The technical term for such words—words that are their own antonyms or opposites—is **contronym**. Popularly, they are known as **Janus** words because the Greek god Janus had two faces, looking in opposite directions.

~

[22] **Freak** means (1) any abnormal or unpredictable phenomenon, occurrence, product, or unusual object; anomaly; aberration; (2) a sudden and apparently causeless change or turn of events, of the mind, etc: *that kind of sudden storm is a freak*; (3) (slang) a person who has withdrawn from normal, rational behaviour and activities to pursue an interest or obsession: *Anuj is a travel freak and uses all his weekends and vacations to explore new territories*; (4) (slang) a devoted fan or follower; enthusiast: *Shankar, a soccer freak, has an entire room full of soccer memorabilia*.

[23] **Obsolete** means no longer in use: *an obsolete rule*; outmoded in design, style, or construction: *an obsolete locomotive*.

Scratch your head over these

When *look* and *see* have similar meanings, how can *overlook* and *oversee* be opposites?
How can the weather be *hot as hell* one day and *cold as hell* the next?
They are *head over heels in love*. That's nice, but don't we do almost everything head over heels?
If you decide to be *bad forever*, you decide to be *bad for good!*
In what other language do people *drive in the parkway* and *park in the driveway?*
At the airport, when the bus goes *back and forth* between terminal and airport, should it not be *forth and back*, since the bus has first to go *forth* to come *back*?
The *first* century BC—should it not be the *last* century BC?[24]

Well, if cramming were the only feasible way to put words into my head, given that I did not possess a photographic memory, I wondered if learning through **etymology**[25] would help. However, when I learnt that etymologically **cynosure**[26] means *dog's tail*, *candidate* is a *person dressed in white*, **sycophant**[27] is literally a *fig shower* and *chauffeur*

[24] Incidentally, the year of the birth of Jesus Christ is **not** the last year of the first century BC (Before Christ) or the first year of first century AD (Anno Domini, translated as 'In the Year of our Lord'). Most scholars believe that the date of Christ's birth is between 6 and 4 BC. Incidentally, BC and AD are increasingly being replaced by BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era), respectively. This change suggests an approach of secularism and sensitivity to non-Christians.

[25] **Etymology** is the study of the origin of words.

[26] **Cynosure** means anything that attracts attention or admiration: *he is the cynosure of all eyes in the world of fashion design.*

[27] **Sycophant** is a follower or a subordinate who flatters excessively: *sycophancy may have gotten you this far, but to progress any further, you will need to work and show results.*

is a *coal feeder*, I ran out of steam and began to have serious doubts about my **foolhardy**[28] venture to master the English language.

The **subtle**[29] **nuances**[30] and **idiosyncrasies**[31] of the language took a toll on my academic progress, since they were rapidly clogging up my memory banks, leaving very little space to accommodate the fundamentals of engineering. I nearly came to an **impasse**[32]—should I clear my critical engineering semester examination or these MBA/MS tests? It was the urge to be recognized as a smooth-talking professional and the prospect of a resultant good life that helped me work harder. Somehow, I managed to squeeze both academics and language into my poor head. And I laboured on.

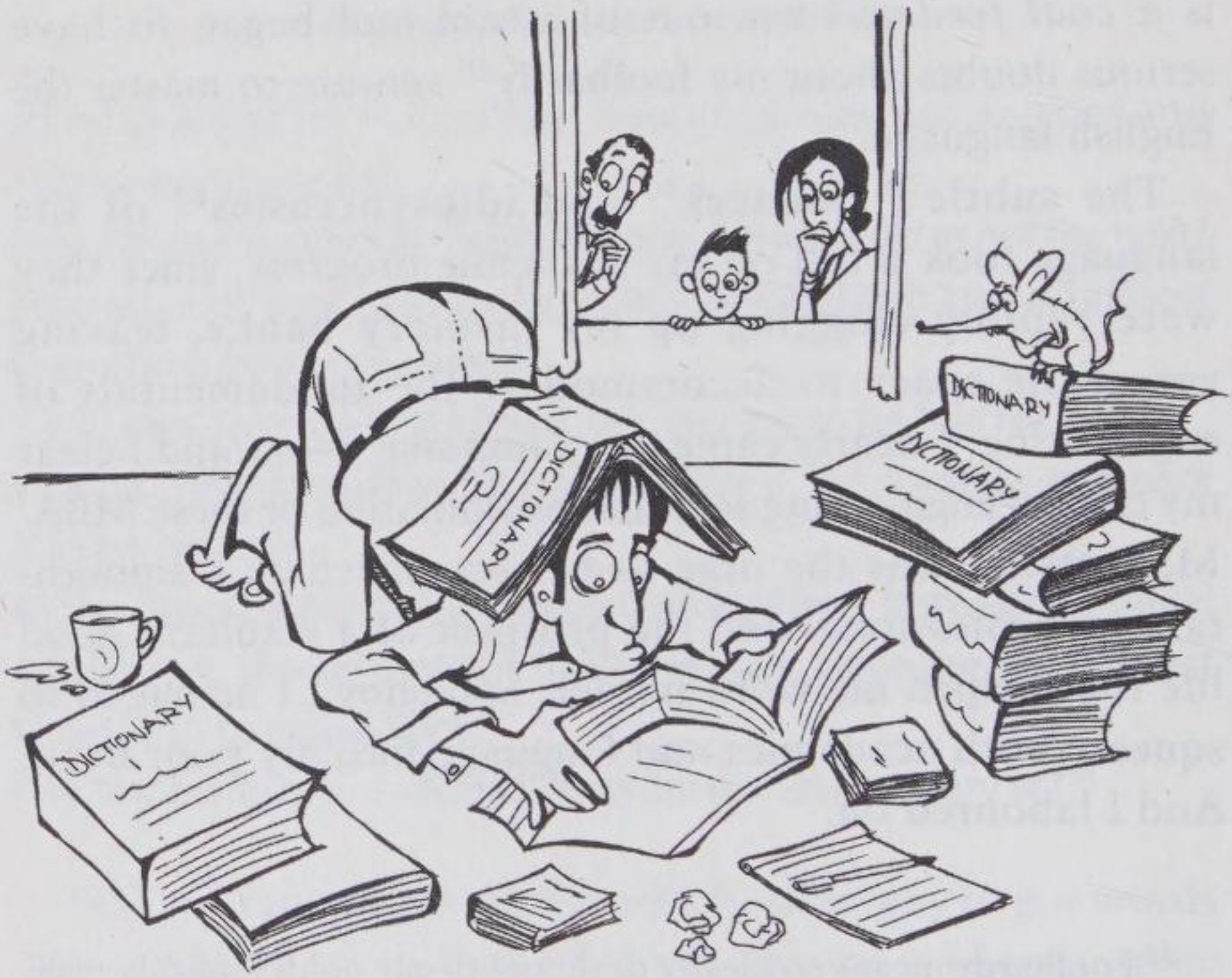
[28] **Foolhardy** means recklessly or thoughtlessly bold, foolishly rash: *the king could not believe that David would be foolhardy enough to challenge Goliath to a fight.*

[29] **Subtle** means fine or delicate and, therefore, difficult to perceive or understand: *his subtle way of indicating my mistakes drove home his point without hurting my ego.*

[30] **Nuance** means a subtle difference or change in expression, meaning, or response. It also means a very minor difference in colour or tone: *men usually cannot appreciate the nuances in colours and textures of fabrics.*

[31] **Idiosyncrasy** is (1) individual hypersensitivity (to a drug or a food); and (2) a peculiar characteristic, habit or mannerism: *there are idiosyncrasies of spelling that makes teaching English to kids a challenging task*. A friend always wears his left shoe first, another keeps a red handkerchief in his right pocket before taking any flight, and a third always ends sentences with 'Am I right?' All these are also examples of idiosyncrasies.

[32] **Impasse** is a position or situation from which there is no escape, a deadlock: *despite intense discussions spread over two days, the council could not break the impasse.*



Meanwhile, I kept **pestering**[33] my seniors for tips on other techniques that I could use to accomplish my goal of acquiring proficiency in the English language. While most of them reminded me that Rome was not built in a day, some did share critical insights from their own experiences in learning the language. They told me that instead of limiting my reading to academia, I must devote time on a regular basis to explore a **variegated**[34] diet of other books, magazines, and newspapers. They also shared what appeared

[33] **Pester** means to bother persistently, usually over petty issues: *don't pester me with your trivial problems.*

[34] **Variegated** means varied and diverse. It also means marked with patches or spots of different colours: *variegated plants need a lot of sunlight to maintain the colour of the foliage.*

to be a very simple and effective technique to extract the best out of such readings: 'Every time you encounter a new word, pause at it, give it a long hard look, make a mental impression of the situation, and **conjecture**[35] its meaning from this imagined situation. Finally, validate your thought by referring to a dictionary.'

Their estimate of the number of such encounters or interruptions perhaps granted me a few pages or at least a respectable number of lines of uninterrupted reading. However, I was **stymied**[36] by around twenty new words on a single page! Try reading any of Amitav Ghosh's books to truly appreciate my situation.

The option of making mental impressions of the situations, conjecturing the meanings of the words from these imagined situations, and committing these newly discovered words to memory was quickly dismissed. How could anyone understand the *situation* in the first place when there were as many as *twenty* incomprehensible words on every page?

So here's what I did. I inaugurated a diary into which I **conscientiously**[37] jotted all the new words I came across. When they grew to a handsome number—and in my case, this was after reading just a few pages!—I would consult the dictionary

[35] **Conjecture** means to guess or suppose from insufficient information or unreliable evidence: *the decision to invest in organized retail was based purely on conjecture.*

[36] **Stymie** means to block, hinder, or stump: *a problem in thermodynamics that stymied half the class.*

[37] **Conscientiously** means guided by one's conscience; principled, scrupulous, honest: *a conscientious decision to speak out against injustice.* It also means meticulous, careful, painstaking, and thorough: *conscientious efforts to manufacture exactly as per the approved design; a conscientious worker.*

and note down all the meanings and pronunciations. Later, whenever I could steal a little time from the lectures and practicals of my engineering course, I would start learning them by **rote**.[38]

Some other advice from my helpful seniors did work. I switched from reading newspaper headlines and sports columns to the centrespread. An editorial, I discovered, could be a gold mine of tough English words. The editorials were written on **contemporary**[39] issues and topics of national interest, unsettling me at times with their commentaries on brain drain to the West. The saving grace was that since I selected the passages I read, on the recommendation of my learned seniors and from subjects of my general interests *(science, humour, romance, relationships)*, I encountered these words under *interesting* contexts.

Magazines like *India Today*, *Time*, *Health*, and *Reader's Digest* were full of articles and stories on different and interesting subjects such as political upheavals; medical and scientific advances; personal and social triumphs; inspirational interviews with famous personalities; ten must-visit travel destinations before one dies; seven tips to improve one's health, happiness, or marital bliss; six easy steps to help one become a great lover; five techniques to stay with in-laws

[38] **Rote** means routine; a fixed, habitual, or mechanical course of procedure: *rote skills are dependent on repetition and practice; the rote of daily living*. This word contributes to a popular phrase 'by rote', which means from memory, (usually) without any thought given to the meaning; in a mechanical way: *to learn the religious book by rote*.

[39] **Contemporary** means existing, occurring, or living at the same time; belonging to the same time; something of the present time, something modern. Events that occur at the same time are said to occur **contemporaneously**.

successfully or handle one's spouse or de-addict children from video games; embarrassing questions teenagers always want to ask but don't know how to; and so on.

Given the breadth of topics, I encountered several new words, especially ones that are used in everyday, conversational English. To my surprise, I realized that even some of the words used in advertisements, jokes, anecdotes, and cartoon strips in these magazines appeared pretty difficult to a late starter like me.

When the context seemed interesting, I could not resist a **lexical**[40] consultation. Often, to my surprise, I discovered that this actually made me appreciate the writing even more. And thus I progressed, painfully but gainfully. Here is an anecdote I came across, which not only made me discover quite a few new words but also helped me realize the dangers of having a limited vocabulary and scanty knowledge of their proper usage.

While sharing a cosy corner with her current heartthrob, Sarah suddenly held John's hand and looking up, announced: 'The **firmament**[41] is **azure**,[42] let's go to the shore.' At first, he was not sure what she was suggesting. And just as they reached the destination, the firmament began to roar, and they were caught in a downpour. While running to find some shelter, she suddenly stopped him and looking into his eyes, said, 'Let's get bedraggled.'

[40] **Lexical** means relating to the lexicon (dictionary) and words or vocabulary of a language.

[41] **Firmament** means the sky, viewed poetically as a solid arch or vault: *Amitav Ghosh is one of the brighter stars in a glittering literary firmament.*

[42] **Azure** means light, purplish blue.

Poor John was unable to decide if it really was a **flirtatious**[43] **overture**[44] (courtesy the 'bed' in bedraggled) or if she meant something else. By a mischance, he decided to go with his initial hunch, and the stinging slap he received, ensured that for the rest of his life he would remember that to get **bedraggled**[45] is to get drenched in water.

While John paid a heavy price for a few **misconstrued**[46] English words, merely visualizing this situation had me in splits. To my pleasant surprise, I discovered that I did not need to mug up words that I encountered in such interesting situations—a far more enjoyable alternative than going repeatedly through random and boring word lists. What's more, these efforts **kindled**[47] my general interest in reading

[43] **Flirtatious** means given to flirting. To flirt is to (1) to make playfully romantic or sexual overtures without serious intentions, and (2) to deal playfully or superficially; to toy, as with an idea: *she flirted with the idea of buying a sports car.*

[44] **Overture** means an opening or initiating move toward negotiations, a new relationship, an agreement; a formal or informal proposal or offer: *overtures of peace; a shy man who rarely made overtures of friendship.*

[45] **Bedraggle** is to make (hair, clothing, etc.) limp, untidy, or dirty, as with rain or mud: *on warm summer days, the kids would bring out the garden pipe and bath foam and soon start looking very bedraggled.*

[46] **Misconstrue** is to misunderstand or misinterpret the meaning of something, to take in a wrong sense: *you are clearly upset and will misconstrue whatever explanation I offer, so let's talk after you have cooled down.*

[47] **Kindle** means (1) to be excited or stirred up, to become aroused or animated (by an emotion, for example): *his return to form kindled their hopes of victory*; *his interest in the field of medicine was kindled*

and I soon evolved from a **compelled**[48] to a **compulsive**[49] reader. Another immediate benefit of this newly acquired reading habit was that it sharpened my *general awareness* of a wide variety of subjects.

However, one column in *Reader's Digest* continued to depress me for quite some time. Even with liberal self-marking, I could never get more than five correct answers out of the fifteen posers in 'Word Power'. I persisted and my scores improved, slowly and steadily, as did my determination to get a perfect 15/15 sooner rather than later.

In this quest to score a perfect 15, I started to explore bookstores and libraries for books on interesting techniques to build one's vocabulary. I discovered two. *Word Power Made Easy* by Norman Lewis was based on *roots* that contributed to a number of words. For instance, if one understood that the Latin root *amor* means 'love', one could easily learn words like *amateur, amatory, amiable, amorous,* and *enamoured* that owe their origins to this root. Another book titled *Word Origins and Their Romantic Stories* by Wilfred Funk had me completely hooked. Stories explaining the origins of some

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by the school practicals on dissection of animals; (2) to light up, become bright or glowing: *happiness kindled her eyes*; and (3) to begin to burn, as combustible matter: *do not kindle the coals of a sinner, lest you be burned in his flaming fire.*

[48] **Compel** means to force or drive, especially to a course of action: *his disregard for the rules compels us to dismiss him.* It also means to secure or bring about by force, to force to submit, to subdue, or to overpower.

[49] **Compulsive** means something that you cannot help, something compelling or compulsory. It also means an irresistible, repeated, irrational impulse to do something: *he suffered from a compulsive eating disorder, brought on by boredom.*

words were so interesting that I found I could easily retain the meanings of those words, even if some of them were not used much in conversational or written English.

It was after reading these books that I discovered why *candidate* means a person dressed in white. Romans, during their election campaigns, used to be dressed in pure white, a colour believed to symbolize absolute purity or incorruptibility.

The word *chauffeur* came from the French *chauffer*—'to heat', an equivalent of the English *stoker*. This was the person who, in the era of steam engines, fed coal to the combustion chambers to raise steam. In those days, another person steered the vehicle and, before the horn was invented, yet another person shooed away pedestrians in the car's route. However, with not too many cars on the roads, the job of steering was considered less **onerous**[50] than that of a coal feeder. As vehicles evolved from being powered by steam to running on gasoline, the coal feeder or stoker got elevated to being the driver of the car, or the **chauffeur**.[51]

In the course of my language-learning journey of twenty years, besides taking help from *interesting anecdotes*, *jokes*, *cartoons*, *advertisements*, and *etymology*, I experimented with other techniques such as the use of *rhymes*, *alliterations*,

[50] **Onerous** means something that troubles, burdensome or oppressive: *onerous duties*. It also means something that has obligations or responsibilities, especially legal ones, that outweigh the advantages.

[51] The French *chauffer* also gave us the word **chafe**, which originally meant to make warm by rubbing and is now mainly used in the sense of making the skin wear, sore or sensitive by continuous rubbing: *my legs continuously rubbed against the horse's saddle and started chafing*. Figuratively, chafe means to be or become vexed, irritated, or impatient.

and *brand names* to unravel the intricacies of the English vocabulary. Then one day, in my third year of engineering, it occurred to me that I could collate my research on these interesting techniques for the benefit of students of the English language. That thought was the genesis of this book.

I used the summer of 1991 to pen down a rough draft of the manuscript on loose sheets of paper. When I got it typed (and it converted to a typescript from a manuscript), my voluminous loose sheets mysteriously condensed into a flimsy booklet. Thanks to other preoccupations, it took me the next twenty years to expand the content to a respectable size. Even now, I believe my attempt is by no means exhaustive. However, if I could help to make the language a little more fun to learn, I would have achieved my goal.

I was always extremely particular about keeping my books in **pristine**[52] condition. And since I was playing catch-up in college with the established bookworms of my class, there was no time to revisit a book once marked as 'read'. The fact that I was borrowing most of the books from the library or friends was an added constraint that **accentuated**[53] this habit. In hindsight, I realize that I could have **imbibed**[54] and retained much more from the wonderful titles I was rapidly consuming in my college days.

[52] **Pristine** means having its original purity; uncorrupted or unsullied. It also means of or relating to the earliest state; primitive: *Port Douglas in Australia, with pristine coral reefs rather close to the shore, is perfect for a relaxing break.*

[53] **Accentuate** means to stress or emphasize, to intensify. It also means to pronounce with a stress or an accent: *the actress wore a figure-hugging dress to accentuate her natural curves.*

[54] **Imbibe** means (1) to drink or consume liquids: *he imbibed immense quantities of iced tea*; (2) to absorb or soak up, as water, light, or

These days, I do not borrow books—I *buy* them. And I do not read books—I *study* them. The **paraphernalia**[55] for this study includes markers and highlighters of different colours. Whenever I come across a fairly interesting, informative, or thought-provoking section, it is marked red, brown, or blue. A few weeks after the book has been **shelved**,[56] I pick it up again to reread the highlighted sections. These are always moments of shock followed by despair. While the colours on the pages still look fresh, my memory has faded and needs to be significantly refreshed. You can **mete**[57] out the same treatment to this book—in fact you must, if you want to get your money's worth. Don't tell me you haven't bought it and are reading a borrowed copy!

Let me also give you good news. Throughout this book, as you encounter difficult words in our discussions, anecdotes and tales, the meanings and the contexts have been provided as footnotes. Hence, you would *not* need to refer to a dictionary too often while reading this book. From my own efforts at reading other books, I know

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heat: *plants imbibe moisture from the soil*; and (3) to take or receive into the mind, as knowledge or ideas: *to imbibe a sermon; to imbibe beautiful scenery*.

[55] **Paraphernalia** means someone's personal belongings or the equipment, apparatus, or furnishings used in a particular activity: *it may be better to rent a skier's paraphernalia (skis, boots, poles, helmet, sunglasses, sunscreen, gloves) at the resort rather than carry it all the way from home*.

[56] **Shelve** means (1) to place (something) on a shelf or shelves, or to furnish any rack or cupboard with shelves; (2) to put off or aside from consideration; and (3) to remove from active use or service; dismiss.

[57] **Mete** (usually followed by 'out') means to distribute or apportion by measure; allot; dole, etc.: *to mete out justice*.

just how cumbersome that can be. I am sure these footnotes will help you read this book in any posture you like (stretched, erect, **slouched**,[58] lying **supine**,[59] or on the **ventral**[60] side). I have also provided the sources of my research as footnotes, should you like to **delve**[61] deeper into any particular topic.

Reading books on vocabulary is an exercise in patience, and even if the authors believe they are interesting reads, it can take a lifetime to finish them. A woman on a bus overheard a conversation between two men seated right behind her. One of them confided that he was going to retire soon. His companion wondered whether he was looking forward to that. 'Indeed yes!' said the first man enthusiastically. 'At least I'll be able to finish my book.' 'Your book!' the second man said in amazement. 'I didn't know you were writing a book!' The first man replied, 'Who's writing a book? I'm reading one!' Here's wishing you much better luck than that man.

[58] **Slouch** means to sit or stand with an awkward, drooping posture: *slouching in front of the television can effectively switch off your back muscles*. It also means an awkward, clumsy, lazy, inept, or inefficient person: *you are such a slouch at home, I wonder how you manage at work!*

[59] **Supine** means lying on the back and facing upward. It is also called the **dorsal** side.

[60] **Ventral** means relating to or situated on or close to the abdomen. One easy way to remember the difference between *supine* and *ventral* is to associate 'supine' with 'our spine' (on the back) and 'ventral' with 'ventilation' (through lungs close to the abdomen). Dorsal can also be memorized by associating it with the word *endorse*. When we *endorse* an idea, we *back* it—*dorsal* means lying on the *back*.

[61] **Delve** means to carry out intensive and thorough research for data or information; investigate: *he delved into the mystery of the disappearing dolphins*.

The woman on the bus didn't overhear the conversation with **malicious**[62] intent but if someone does so, he or she is an 'eavesdropper'. If you wonder what a strange word it is to denote this weird habit, the story goes that, centuries ago, houses in England didn't have any facility to dispose of rainwater falling from the roof. For fear of water dripping into the very foundations, the roofs were made with wide overhangs, called 'eaves'. So, the first 'eavesdroppers' literally stood in the shelter of these overhangs to overhear private conversations!

[62] **Malicious** means full of malice or ill-will. It also means mischievous in motivation or purpose: *malicious gossip*.

2

BORROWINGS FROM SOPHOMORES[1]

At the end of my first year of college, I had painfully concluded that it is beyond the average human capacity to capture and comprehend the vast canvas and complexity of the English language. Yet, at the same time, I was confident that I was on the right track. I was convinced that if I intensified my pace of learning new words, their pronunciations and multiple meanings, I would be moderately accomplished by the middle of my final year—the time I would be officially pitted against my more educated colleagues in competitive exams such as CAT, XAT, GRE and GMAT.

And yet, I knew that this accomplishment would not be enough, if I continued to carry the fear of opening my mouth and not letting English words flow out fluently and effortlessly. Besides, a new trend of personality assessment—over and above the required grip on technical matters—was rapidly emerging in the interview process of top engineering companies. It was the 1990s and the concept and role of softer skills like command over language, positive attitude, strong

[1] **Sophomore** is a second-year student at an American college. (A **freshman** is a first-year student.)

interpersonal skills, pleasant personality and other attributes of leadership had gained strength even for the selection of candidates trained in technical streams. The trend continues even now.

What's more, hardcore engineering jobs in areas such as research and development (R&D), planning and project management, and commissioning and maintenance of plants and machinery were not growing as quickly as jobs in sales and marketing, and these were increasingly being offered to well-rounded, fluent, and often multilingual graduates.

Some engineering companies insisted on conducting group discussions on contemporary or even abstract subjects, to assess originality, quick thinking, leadership skills and fluency. Thus, even if one were to fail to make the cut for postgraduation in engineering science or management, it was tough to get **Day 1**[2] and even Day 2 jobs—despite being in the top 5 per cent to 10 per cent of the class—without such co-curricular and extracurricular accomplishments.

I had worked very hard to drill the sense of urgency for accomplishing this task in my roommates Satpal and Satvinder Singh, both products of the **hinterland**[3] states of Haryana and Punjab, respectively. In hindsight, it seems that these people were far ahead of me in ensuring fat salaries and extensive overseas travel, that too without burdening their billions of neurons with millions of new English words and

[2] A system of rating companies to decide the order in which they would visit the campus and interview candidates.

[3] **Hinterlands** are the remote or less developed parts of a country: *the hinterlands are usually much more picturesque than the urban areas*. It also refers to the land behind a coastal region or an inland area supplying goods, especially trade goods, to a port.

zillions[4] of conversations in this alien tongue. All that ever interested them was engines, turbines, shipping terminology, and techniques to avoid sea sickness, for they already had their hearts set on joining the merchant navy.

Left without partners on whom I could try my broken and often grammatically murdered sentences, I was forced to change my dorm midway through first year and join hands as well as, literally, my bed (given this was a smaller dormitory) with Neeraj Hasija and Darpan Talwar. This gang thought quite like me and we promised to converse a lot in, only and purely, English. As a result, the billions of neurons in my brain went into overdrive, forming new neural pathways comprising some broken, some **halting**,[5] and occasionally, even a few fluent sentences.

In the beginning, the fluent sentences tended to be extremely short: '*How was your day? How is mess food? Let us go out to eat. She is veeeeery hot!*' However, as we persisted, we saw broken parts get mended, the rate of halting reduce, and one-shot correct sentences get longer and more frequent. To speed up our progress—so that we could rag our juniors fluently, strike casual conversations with the convent boys, and make great impressions on the convent girls—we even spent precious money and time watching English movies.

[4] **Zillion** (often plural) is an extremely large but unspecified or indeterminate number, quantity, or amount: *zillions of bees in the honeycomb*.

[5] **Halting** means (1) faltering or hesitating, especially in speech; (2) faulty or imperfect; and (3) limping or lame: *a halting gait*. As a verb, it means to stop moving or operating or working, either permanently or temporarily: *they halted operations during wage negotiations*. As an interjection, *halt* is a command to stop and stand motionless, as to marching troops or to a fleeing suspect.

It was a very simple yet supremely effective technique. Or so we thought. The more we get to hear and register conversations where the hero charms the sexy lady, the more we could imbibe the style and statements that cast this magic on other people, such as tough interview panels. The first English film we watched was *Runaway Bride*. And, by the way, the film selection was not based on any research on its conversational **quotient**[6] or any great fondness for the actors or the director; it was simply the only one being screened in the cinemas of Chandigarh at the time that this idea struck us.

Initially, we did not follow even *one* complete sentence of the heavily accented English of these American actors and only managed to join in the laughs, a few seconds *after* the rest of the audience burst out laughing during a particularly incomprehensible dialogue. Though we were completely dejected at this dismal show we persisted. And so, 200 days and 100 movies later, down 850 rupees (at the rate of Rs 8.5 per movie, split as Rs 4.5 for the movie ticket, Rs 2 for the return bus fare from sector 12 to sector 17, and Rs 2 for a plate of ***aloo tikki***[7] and ***samosa***[8]), we were able to improve our scores to spontaneous laughter at around 50 per cent of

[6] **Quotient** is the whole-number part of the result obtained when one number is divided by another. For instance, if one divides 22 by 5, 4 is the quotient and 2 is the remainder. To put it another way, *quotient* is the number of times one quantity is contained in another. In the above example, the number 5 is contained 4 times in the number 20.

[7] ***Aloo tikki*** is a pan-fried North Indian snack made of boiled potatoes and various spices. *Aloo* means 'potato' and *tikki* means 'small cutlet' or **croquette**.

[8] ***Samosa*** is a deep-fried snack made of a triangular pastry shell with a savoury filling, which may include spiced potatoes, onions, peas, coriander, and lentils, or minced lamb or chicken.

the funny moments. Sadly, it was still 'laughter with a lag' for the balance 50 per cent.

In my sophomore year, we were entitled to single rooms. Naturally, we planned to stay in close proximity and continue our quest with the same vigour and momentum that had built up over the last 200 days. At this juncture, a critical piece of advice came from my **day scholar**[9] friend Arun Goyal, who had roots in the hinterlands of Haryana but had moved to Chandigarh to complete his schooling.

He confessed that during his entire schooling in Haryana, he had—like us—remained in deep dread of English and in deep awe of people who had it at their command. I was literally shocked at this unbelievable transformation as he now conversed rather fluently. He had also nearly acquired the accent of Indian students from convent schools, who had been brought up on a diet of English movies and music right from their **impressionable**[10] years as tiny tots.

I was already **salivating**[11] at the prospect of getting a handle on his secret and, luckily, he seemed to be in a mood to share it. He had spent the initial weeks at the school isolating those specimens from his class who ranked extremely high on fluency but equally low on academic competence. He then made an offer they couldn't refuse. He would start sharing with

[9] **Day scholar** is an individual who goes to school or college during the day and returns home in the evening, as opposed to a hosteller who stays on the campus. Native speakers of English do not use this term; they would probably say 'lives off campus'.

[10] **Impressionable** means easily influenced or susceptible: *youngsters are impressionable and need to be steered away from films depicting vices and violence.*

[11] **Salivating** means to secrete or produce saliva. It also means to be full of desire or eagerness for something: *salivating at the thought of watching the World Cup final in the stadium.*

them all his class notes and even solutions to the numerical problems given as homework. In exchange, they would have to include him in their group both at school and at play.

According to him, **cohabitation**[12] and conversations with folks from the same **moat**[13] could help me shed my fears but would never allow me to attain the fluency and style I sought so desperately. And if I were really serious about taking my conversational ability to the next level, I had to literally exist in the *shadow* of one of those convent types who I hoped to compete with and **vanquish**[14] by the middle of my final year.

This *living in the shadow* was an uncomfortable thought but, after a little survey, I zeroed in on the non-competing but exceptionally competent Archford Munetsi. Archie, as we fondly called him, was a well-built, well-rounded, very affable, and extremely **articulate**[15] gentleman from

[12] **Cohabit** means to live together in an intimate relationship, say as husband and wife, usually without legal or religious sanction. It also means to dwell with another or share the same place: *separated by continents, they experienced intimacy not through cohabitation, but through their regular correspondence.*

[13] **Moat** is a deep, wide trench, usually filled with water, surrounding a fort or castle, or any similar trench used to confine animals in a zoo: *the overlapping trees on both sides have now become a living bridge, which you can climb up to cross the moat.* I have used this word in a figurative sense, as my friends and I were in a deep, wide trench as far as our English proficiency was concerned.

[14] **Vanquish** means to win over something or someone, to defeat or overcome in battle, contest, conquest, argument, or debate: *she managed to vanquish all her fears of public speaking by doing multiple mock sessions in front of family and friends.*

[15] **Articulate** means someone endowed with the power of expression, one who can express oneself easily in clear, coherent, and effective

Zimbabwe, who was on a national scholarship from his country to study principles of civil engineering from an Indian college of national repute.

He was non-competing as he desperately wanted to return to his long-time girlfriend and his family after graduation, get employed, settle down . . . Naturally, he had no plans to pursue a masters degree in science in the US. And, for sure, the conditions of the national scholarship did not allow him to change his stream from engineering to management.

Archie had no issues being my next-door neighbour so the deal was easily closed. But I soon found out that he had long outgrown his boyish fascination for the fairer sex and was now heavily into **metaphysical**[16] concepts such as the purpose of life, the existence of god, reincarnation, cause of pain and suffering, and so on.

Thankfully (and mercifully for me), he was also into sports (particularly cricket and football), the art of impressive writing and speech-making, further refining his advanced interpersonal skills, and understanding the cultural differences in societies of both nations (particularly the status of women in India, the concept of arranged marriage, the practice of dowry, and the system of castes and sub-castes, and reservations in colleges and workplaces on that basis).

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language, whether written or spoken. It also means something composed of distinct, meaningful syllables or words, as human speech, or something characterized by the use of clear, expressive language.

[16] **Metaphysical** means related to metaphysics. In philosophy, it means (1) concerned with abstract thought or subjects, as existence, causality, or truth; and (2) highly abstract, subtle, or abstruse: *his topics of essays veer towards the metaphysical.*

The countless hours spent with Archie, discussing almost everything under the sun, did much more to improve my fluency, get much-needed style in my sentence construction, and correct my pronunciation than anything I had done before or anything I did thereafter. I was now getting on to a solid wicket, striking successful conversations with the convent boys and making—what I liked to believe—profound impressions on the convent girls, without sweating or stammering.

In parallel, the endeavour to read voraciously and apply mnemonic techniques to rapidly expand my vocabulary continued at the same **scorching**[17] pace as earlier. What started to slip, however, were grades, and I quickly reconciled myself to a comfortable existence in the next 10 per cent bracket from the initial resolve to stay in the top 5 per cent of the class.

Somehow, I still managed to set aside time to delve into other extracurricular pursuits—some for sheer pleasure (like roaming around the Architecture Girls' Hostel and sipping one cup of *masala chai*[18] while **nibbling**[19] at one *samosa* for hours together in their canteen) and one bound by a deep sense of responsibility (like taking the family friend's

[17] **Scorch** means (1) to burn superficially to discolour or alter the taste or texture: *the collar of the shirt was yellow where the iron had scorched it*; (2) to parch or shrivel with heat: *the sun scorched the grass*; (3) to destroy (crops, towns, etc.) by or as if by fire and leave nothing that an advancing enemy army can salvage; (4) (informal) to go, move, travel, or drive at a very fast, often excessively fast rate: *she picked up dancing at a scorching pace leaving all other fellow students far behind.*

[18] ***Masala chai*** (literally 'mixed spice tea') is a beverage from the Indian subcontinent made by brewing tea with a mixture of aromatic Indian spices and herbs, such as cinnamon, cardamom, etc.

[19] **Nibble** means to eat or chew in small bites: *nibbling at the edges of the problem shall not resolve it; we need to take it as whole.*

studious and bespectacled daughter to eat out on a borrowed bike whenever she got fed up of the mess food at her Punjab University hostel, and that was often). Some friends even provided long-distance motivation. My friend Sameer, then a sophomore at IIT Delhi and a bright but vernacular **chappie**[20] like me, sent me a letter about his romantic exploits.

*'**Yaar**,[21] I think I have impressed this girl so much that whenever we meet, she compliments me, saying "You are a very nice and cute person, Sameer." It tickles my heart, and I always want to return her compliments besides simply uttering, "Thank you Sanjana." But each time my sense of insecurity gets the better of me, and I keep mum. But today, she handed me this chit in the library, which read: "A vivacious girl veraciously admits that she has a voracious appetite" and stood close to me as I **gingerly**[22] opened it and tried to comprehend what appeared to be a **cryptic**[23] clue. Naturally, she expected some instant response. Yaar, my world went **topsy-turvy**[24] and my head started to spin. Since I did not follow her sentence and hence her intent, I excused*

[20] **Chappie** (also chappy) is a British informal word for chap, a fellow; man or boy. In British dialect, a *chap* is a customer and in the US (chiefly Midland and southern US), a baby or young child.

[21] *Yaar* means friend in Hindustani.

[22] **Gingerly** means with great care or delicacy; cautiously: *she gingerly removed the broken bulb from the light socket*; or *Jack stepped gingerly around the sleeping guard dog.*

[23] **Cryptic** means (1) having hidden meaning, mystifying, puzzling, and ambiguous: *a cryptic message*; (2) secret or occult: *a cryptic writing*; and (3) abrupt, terse, or short: *a cryptic note.*

[24] **Topsy-turvy** means turned upside down, inverted, reversed, etc.: *a topsy-turvy reflection.* It also means confusing or disorderly: *the topsy-turvy world of politics.*

myself at the pretext of attending the lecture and instead rushed to the reference room upstairs.

'I consulted the dictionary and found that ***vivacious*** *is full of high spirits and energy. She is definitely vivacious. She laughs a lot and is always raring to do something or the other, even jumps steps on the staircase ahead of me.* ***Veracious*** *is habitually truthful or honest. I can't doubt her honesty as she always splits the bill honestly at the college canteen, never makes* ***proxy***[25] *attendance calls on behalf of her absentee friends, and doesn't tear off pages from the library magazines. And* ***voracious*** *is characterized by excessive eagerness to do anything, from reading books to* ***devouring***[26] *food in great quantities.*

'Yaar, this is now causing me a lot of anxiety. Why should a highly spirited and energetic (vivacious) girl, honestly and truthfully (veraciously) tell me that she has an excessive eagerness (voracity) to read books or devour large quantities of food? Or does she have something else in her mind when she makes this statement? But how can I be sure? What should I do

[25] **Proxy** means (1) the power, agency or function of a person authorized to act as the deputy or substitute for another: *the brand and size of car is a good proxy for household income in absence of income data*; (2) the person so authorized: *members who are out of station may appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf at the general body meeting*; (3) a written authorization empowering another person to vote or act for the signatory, as at a meeting of stockholders: *proxy forms are enclosed in case you are not able to make it in person*; and (4) an ally or confederate who can be relied upon to speak or act on one's behalf.

[26] **Devour** means to eat greedily or to take in greedily with the senses or intellect: *to devour the works of Freud*. It also means to consume destructively, recklessly, or wantonly: *fire devoured the old museum*; and also to absorb or engross wholly: *a mind devoured by fears*.

now? You are more experienced, I know . . . Please pull me out of this ***imbroglio***!'[27]

I wrote back:

'The time is ripe for a proposal Don't delay any further else, like a ***pugnacious pugilist****, she'll hit you and give you a* ***pug nose***!'

To fully understand my piece of advice, he again rushed to the reference section in the library and found that **pugnacious** is a person who is ever ready to fight, belligerent and combative: *they hired him as a construction supervisor as they thought his pugnacious style would suit the job*. A **pugilist** is a person who fights with his fists, a synonym for a boxer (from Latin *pugnus*—'fist' and *pugna*—'fight'): *Mohammad Ali, a famous pugilist, was stripped off his heavyweight boxing title in 1967 because he refused to join the US Army*. And **pug nose** is a short, stubby, upturned nose, just the type someone could acquire on receipt of a full-blooded punch like, in this case, under desperation due to failure in love.

He also discovered that *pugnacious* comes from the Latin root *pugnare*—'to fight', a root that has helped form another word **impugn**, which means to *attack* by words or arguments, to contradict, to assail, to oppose or to make **insinuations**[28]

[27] **Imbroglio** is a complicated, difficult or perplexing situation. It also refers to a misunderstanding or disagreement of a complicated or bitter nature between persons or nations: *the imbroglio was expected to last long, as neither party was in any mood to concede even a little ground.*

[28] **Insinuation** is a suggestion or a hint, usually of an insulting or accusing nature: *she noticed an insinuation in his statements about his preference for a low-key farewell.*

against someone or something: *it is unethical to impugn an opponent's record, if the attack is based on data from a questionable source.*

If you noticed, what I used in my short note was a special form of writing in which there is repetition of the same initial sound (not necessarily letters) in words in close association. This style of writing is called **alliteration,** and it can serve as an excellent memory aid.

Sameer feared the prospect of a pug nose. And yet the courage or conviction to propose to his lady love eluded him. Later, pug-nosed, he wrote to me: '*If only I had followed your advice . . . if!*'

I wonder why Sameer couldn't muster the courage to propose to Sanjana! Perhaps he wasn't sure and was still wondering whether it was indeed true love or merely a passing infatuation. This fluctuation in one's ideas or opinions is best expressed by the word **vacillation** (from Latin *vacillare*,

It can be fun to make our own alliterations. While you are at it, why not check the meanings of the underlined words in the few examples of alliteration below?

- *We felt dreary and dismal in the darkness of the night.*
- *Around the rugged rock, the ragged rascal ran.*
- *She channels her chagrin by engaging in demanding deportment.*
- *A substantial stock of sausages sacrificed to satiate the hungry soul.*
- *How high his Highness holds his haughty head!*
- *Boasting of boisterous bonhomie in a B-school bash.*
- *Progression is not proclamation nor palaver. It is not pretence nor play on prejudice. It is not of personal pronouns nor perennial pronouncements. It is not the perturbation of a people passion-wrought, nor a promise proposed. Progression is everlastingly lifting the standards that marked the end of the world's march yesterday and planting them on new and advanced heights today.* (From the speech of Warren Harding, 29th President of the US, delivered at the 1912 Republican Convention).

Here's an alliteration that is also a tongue twister: *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.*

vacillat—'to waver'). It also denotes indecision. It could also be physical, which would mean swaying the body from side to side. You could also rhyme vacillation with **oscillation**, and incidentally both words mean the same when used in relation to tangible objects.

Ambivalence (from Latin *ambi*—'both' and *valere*—'be strong') is another word to describe a conflicting state of

emotions when you are unable to make a choice between *two* equally *strong* options or by a desire to say or do two opposite or conflicting things, at the same time: *I was in a state of ambivalence, as both my favourite sports were being telecast live at the same time.*

Vacillation or ambivalence in ideas may not be intentional but when one makes a statement that can be interpreted in two very different ways, it becomes an **equivocation** (Latin *aequus*—'equal' and *vocare*—'to speak'). Such ambiguous use of language is meant to deliberately mislead or confuse:[29] *I have little tolerance for equivocation; I need clear reasons for your non-performance.*

Coming back to Sameer, who often moaned: 'If only I had **followed** your advice . . . if!' In Latin, 'to follow' is *sequor*, and from this root we have **sequel**: something that follows something else, a result, a consequence, or an inference. In a literary work or film, a sequel is a complete work in itself, which sometimes continues the narrative of a preceding work. For example, *Scarlett* is a sequel to *Gone with the Wind*, and the book *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J.R.R. Tolkien is a sequel to *The Hobbit*. Incidentally, *The Two Towers* is a sequel to *The Fellowship of the Ring* to which, in turn, *The Return of the King* is yet another sequel.

Since we are talking about sequels, I cannot resist a mention of **prequels**. This word did not exist until the release of the film *Butch and Sundance: The Early Days*. Interestingly, this film was released 'after' the release of the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* but dealt with the time 'before' the events of the first movie, and had younger actors! Evidently, it could

[29] A very commonly used antonym of equivocal is **unequivocal**.

not be a sequel since the protagonists are most definitely killed at the end of the first movie.

Another word that has originated from the same root is **consequent**, something that *follows* as an effect or result (often followed by 'on', 'upon', or 'to'); *follows* as a logical conclusion: *a reduction in the size of chocolate bars consequent to a rise in production costs*. Sameer's *'If only I had followed your advice . . . if!'* moans were his *consequent* thoughts.

Yet another word from the same root is **obsequies**. These are rites and ceremonies attached to a funeral. It has its roots in *follow* since at a funeral procession the mourners usually *follow* the corpse. The root also gives us **obsequious**—a fellow who *follows* you like a slave, obeys all your instructions and is attentive to all your needs: *an obsequious attendant at a hotel.*

My friend Sameer, I am not ashamed to admit, was more courageous and decisive than I've portrayed him so far—for the sake of explaining a few new words. He also had great command over the English language, which explains his use of words like *gingerly*, *cryptic*, *topsy-turvy*, and *imbroglio* in his letters. He didn't even take my advice on how, when, and where to take Sanjana out on a date. Instead, he flashed the following accomplishment message through a letter:

'Please take pleasure in the fact that her voracious appetite has been satiated. However, selective abstinence is being practised to aggrandize the already ample amorous force! Sameer'

Satiate means to supply with excess so as to satisfy fully: *it is very tough to satiate a child's curiosity for knowledge.* **Abstinence** is any self-restraint or self-denial, especially

from alcoholic beverages or physical relationships. It also refers to the state of being without a drug on which one is dependent: *his* ***protracted***[30] *moderation in consuming liquor and cigarettes finally led to total abstinence.*

Amorous means strongly attracted, inclined, or disposed to love, especially sexual love. It also means being in love, being enamoured. My friends Ajay and Jaya were locked in an amorous embrace when a policeman took them to task for public display of affection. He **intervened**[31] quite poetically:

'Hey you, Romeo and Juliet
Vitiating[32] *social etiquette*
Immediately ***disentangle***[33] *from your amorous embrace*
Else, be prepared for a hefty fine that you may face'

[30] To **protract** is to prolong or delay: *a protracted negotiation that finally resulted in an agreement.*

[31] **Intervene** means (1) to come between disputing people, groups; intercede; mediate; (2) to occur or happen between two things, other events or periods: *we enjoyed the picnic until a thunderstorm intervened*; and (3) to interfere with force or threat of force: *to intervene in the affairs of another country.*

[32] **Vitiate** means to spoil or corrupt, to impair or weaken the quality or effectiveness of something. It also means to make something legally defective or invalid: *the atmosphere in the office was vitiated after the announcement of, what the majority believed, was a biased selection of top performers.*

[33] **Disentangle** means to free or get free from entanglement. **Entangle** means (1) to mix or twist together, enmesh, or entwine into a confusing mass; snarl: *please help me disentangle the telephone cord*; *her long scarf entangled itself in the bicycle wheel*; and (2) to involve in hampering or awkward complications; entrap: *he got entangled in office politics due to his extreme simplicity and straightforwardness.*

To **aggrandize** is to increase the size or intensity of something, to make something greater in appearance, power, wealth, rank, or honour. Sameer believed in the philosophy '*familiarity breeds contempt and separation aggrandizes attraction*' and exercised selective abstinence.

Thinking about falling in love and successful proposals, I recollect an amusing incident from Sam Levenson's famous book *In One Era and Out the Other*:

> 'I was 25 before I had job enough and courage enough to propose to Esther. Marry me and you'll make me the happiest man on earth. She came back with "I will tell you the truth, Sam darling,[34] I've already been asked to get married." My heart fell to the ground dragging my knees along. "You have! By whom?" "By my mother and father, lots of times; I was just waiting for somebody besides them to ask me."'

Did you notice that I underlined the word 'darling'? This is the word that I longed to call someone from the time those small impressions of hair on my face started to do mysterious things to my heart. I was now in college and still waiting. There was a girl back home whose company I had been sorely missing since I left the city for college. And so I drafted my first **billet-doux,**[35] which began, 'Darling Sapna, Hi! By God's grace and parents' blessings, I am fine here. I hope you are just the same at your end' and ended, 'Dearly yours, Nishu.'

[34] The word *darling* was not present in the original text by the author. I have inserted it.

[35] **Billet-doux** is French for 'love letter' (from French *billet*—'note' and *doux*—'sweet').

One day, I chanced upon a description of some suffixes that the author called **diminutives**. These suffixes (-isk, -cle, -cule, -el, -ette, -et, -il, -let, -ling, -ule) instantly miniaturized the words they got attached to. Like there is an *asterisk*: a little star (Latin aster—'star'); *particle*: a small part; *molecule*: a small mole (Latin mole—'mass'); *globule*: a small globe or spherical body; ***minuscule***:[36] very small (Latin minus—'less'); *capsule*: a small box or container (Latin capsa—'box'); *morsel*: a small bite (Latin morsus—'bite'); *cigarette*: a small cigar; *leaflet*: a small leaf; *rivulet*: a small brook or stream (Latin rivus—'stream'); *coronet*: a small crown; *eyelet*: a small eye (specifically, something that looks like an eye, like a hole through the head of a needle); *duckling*: a young duck, and *darling*: a little dear ('dar' being the ancient variant spelling of dear). It was a revelation to me that the word darling was derived from dear and, in a **figurative**[37] sense, a little dear was more lovable and adorable than a big dear.

You saw how helpful falling in love and successful proposals were to our learning. However, merely dreaming about love can sometimes have undesired consequences. Let us explore this through the story of my waste paper basket or WPB from my engineering days. Before we begin, let us understand the difference between an abbreviation and an

[36] **Minuscule** has frequently come to be misspelled as **miniscule**, perhaps due to the prefix 'mini'. This occurs with such frequency in edited writing that most consider it a variant spelling rather than a misspelling.

[37] **Figurative** describes something that is not to be interpreted literally, but used as a symbol or a likeness. It is based on or making use of figures of speech; metaphorical. An example of figurative language is when you say that you are so hungry, you could eat a horse. This word also means of or relating to artistic representation by means of animal or human figures.

acronym. WPB is an example of an abbreviation as all three of its letters are pronounced individually, while an acronym is an abbreviation that can be pronounced like a word. For instance, if WHO (World Health Organisation) were an acronym, it would be pronounced as 'hoo'.

Some commonly used abbreviations:

AKA—Also Known As
ASAP—As Soon As Possible
B2B—Business to Business
BTW—By The Way
BPO—Business Process Outsourcing
EMI—Equated Monthly Instalments
FAQ—Frequently Asked Questions
FDI—Foreign Direct Investment
FYI—For Your Information
HNI—High Net-Worth Individual
IPO—Initial Public Offering
ISO—International Organization for Standardization
ISP—Internet Services Provider
NPA—Non-Performing Asset
NRI—Non-Resident Indian
PNR—Passenger Numerical Record
TDS—Tax Deducted at Source
VRS—Voluntary Retirement Scheme

Some popular acronyms:

DINK—Double Income No Kids
ICE—In Case of Emergency
KISS—Keep It Simple Stupid

PAN—Permanent Account Number
SIM—Subscriber Identification Module
SWAK—Sealed With A Kiss
VAT—Value Added Tax

Coming back to my WPB . . . My hostel didn't have proper trash disposal arrangements but that mattered little to me. Living on the top floor, with the advantage of a separate balcony, I could dump my litter over the heads of the residents living on the floors below. But that still meant walking all the way from my room into the balcony, a rather inconvenient proposition for a student always consumed with extracurricular thoughts or immersed in studies.

The thought of investing in a WPB often crept into my mind but each time something more pressing on the list ate into my limited finances. Finally, **D-Day**[38] arrived. It was a pleasant summer evening, and I had just returned from my weekly shopping, carrying a chilled packet of milk. Once in my room, I whipped up a chocolate shake using the last of my drinking chocolate and gulped down the beverage in one go. I wiped my moustache clean of bits of froth and chucked the empty chocolate tin through the open door, over the

[38] **D-Day** [informal] is any day of special significance, as one marking an important event or goal. In a military context, the day, usually kept secret from most, set for the beginning of a planned attack. It also specifically refers, as a proper noun, to 6 June 1944, the day the Allied ground and air forces landed in Normandy, France, to battle Nazi occupation of Western Europe. D-Day comes from D (abbreviation of Day) plus day.

balcony . . . *Tnnnn—nnnnn*—and a wild roar shattered the calm **milieu.**[39]

It sounded as if the young associate professor, who taught us 'Strength of Materials' and was also our hostel warden, had **copped**[40] the tin with a sensitive part of his anatomy. If he discovered that I was the culprit, acceptance of my thesis would be seriously **jeopardized,**[41] for he was also my thesis guide. I **scrammed**[42] towards what I thought was a safe haven.

[39] **Milieu** is just another term for the surroundings, atmosphere, especially of a social or a cultural nature: *the social milieu of the 1960s was vastly different from the current times.*

[40] **Cop** is (1) to take or catch, to nab, to capture (probably variant of *cap*—'to catch'): *he copped a quick look at the celebrity standing in the next line at the airport immigration counter*; (2) to get hold of, to gain or win: *a movie that copped three Oscars*; (3) to take unlawfully or without permission, to steal; (4) as a phrasal verb (cop out), it means to avoid fulfilling a commitment, promise, or responsibility, to renege, to back out (often followed by 'on' or 'of'): *he never copped out on a friend in need*; or *you agreed to go, and you can't cop out now*; (5) as an idiom (cop a plea), it means to plead guilty to a lesser charge to avoid standing trial for a more serious charge. In informal usage, it also refers to a **police officer**. Some believe that is an acronym for 'Constable On Patrol' and others think it derives from the clipping of 'copper' or from the copper badges worn by New York policemen. But it seems that neither of these theories holds water. As per *Merriam Webster New Book of Word Histories*, around the middle of the 19th century, a policeman became a copper, one who cops or catches and arrests criminals. And within a decade of this usage, it got shortened to cop.

[41] **Jeopardy** is danger, hazard, peril, trouble: *inferior thermal wear could jeopardize the health of our soldiers in a high-altitude war.*

[42] **Scram** (informal) means to leave the scene at once, go abruptly. This word is perhaps a shortened form of scramble: *he scrammed at the first sign of trouble between protestors and the police.*

But instead of climbing down the only staircase that also served people coming up from the ground floor and dreading the consequences of a face-to-**splattered**[43]-face encounter with my professor, I hurriedly locked my room, **bolted**[44] into the toilet, and **bolted** myself in.

What a relief! Slowly and surely as my heartbeat returned to normalcy, I realized that I couldn't stand the stench very much longer. Presumably the professor, through with first-aid and other **ministrations,**[45] would now be **prone,**[46] leisurely **contemplating**[47] life and his chances of making a complete recovery. I rushed straight to the nearby market. The day had come when the 100 rupees set aside for the ever-elusive *date* had to be put to better use.

I purchased the WPB along with other articles of personal hygiene from the general store. The WPB that I selected was artistically styled and highly priced. All my toiletries

[43] **Splatter** means to splash or scatter with impact: *I accidentally dropped the egg and its contents were splattered on the counter.*

[44] **Bolt** (as a verb) means (1) a sudden dash, run, flight, or escape; *the racehorse jumped over the railing and bolted from the course, without its rider*; (2) to discontinue support of or participation in: *to bolt a political party*; and (3) to fasten or secure with or as with a bolt. Looks like this word is another example of a contronym!

[45] **Ministration** means the act or process of serving or aiding. It also means the act of performing the duties of a cleric: *thanks to his patient ministration, patients are able to recover faster.*

[46] **Prone** means having a natural inclination or tendency to something; disposed; liable: *to be prone to anger*. It also means having the front or ventral part downward; lying face down; lying prostrate.

[47] **Contemplate** means to consider carefully and at length; meditate on or ponder: *contemplated the problem from all sides*. It also means to have something in mind as a possibility: *contemplate marriage*; *forced by the accident to contemplate retirement.*

were conveniently placed in it, and I carried it back home as a carry bag. To my pleasant surprise, the general store appeared to have **inadvertently**[48] forgotten to charge me for my modified carry bag. I congratulated myself on my luck and kissed the sparkling WPB, for the first and last time.

Then started the search for a place where the WPB could be displayed in all its glory. At last, a corner was finalized, which had been rather underutilized in the layout of my hostel room. To make it feel immediately comfortable and at home, the wrappers of the newly bought toiletries were placed at jaunty angles inside it.

Finally, summer appeared blissful and life was convenient. Every morning, the garbage collector would empty the WPB of all its accumulations into the large rubbish trolley he dragged along. Many days rolled by. The semester examination approached to take its toll on our eyesight, muscles, and general health. My mom sent a special messenger to deliver pure-*ghee*,[49] nut-enriched *pinnies*[50] for her son, **wilting**[51] under the heat of the sun and the examination. The packet of *pinnies* was securely lodged under the pile of clothes in my cupboard.

[48] **Inadvertent** means failing to act carefully or considerately; inattentive. It also means resulting from heedless action; unintentional: *wishful thinking of creating a uniform syllabus inadvertently spread panic among students and their parents.*

[49] **Ghee** is *clarified* semi-fluid butter, made from the milk of cows and buffaloes, used especially in Indian cooking. To *clarify* is to remove solid matter from a liquid by boiling, to make it clear.

[50] ***Pinnie*** is the Hindi name of an Indian sweet made from wheat flour, sugar and dry fruits, roasted in *ghee*.

[51] **Wilt** is to physically droop, fade, sag, wane, or wither away: *the flowers wilted under the scorching sun.*

At what I considered an opportune moment one evening, I bolted the door, drew the curtains, opened the packet, shut my eyes in anticipation, and lifted one *pinnie* towards my salivating mouth . . . There was a knock on the door—I dropped the whole packet into the WPB, which at that time was the most easily accessible place. Opening the door with a welcoming smile, I greeted the fellow with a thick book in his hand and thick glasses to dwarf his eyes. He wanted me to solve one of his engineering problems. Once satisfied with the solution, he **plonked**[52] himself on my bed, and we commenced gossiping.

At that age, it was but natural that all conversation—whether about friends, enemies, professors, sports, movies, or politics—finally **veered**[53] towards the fairer sex! When he left after a couple of hours, I **flopped**[54] on my bed, still smiling at our discussion and quickly fell into a deep **slumber.**[55]

[52] **Plonk** (informal) means to put down something heavily and carelessly. It is a variant of the word *plunk* and also refers to a cheap or inferior wine: *he plonked the pile of dishes into the sink*.

[53] **Veer** is to change direction, turn, or swerve, and may be used literally or figuratively: *the car veered towards the ditch; or I veered towards engineering after realizing that dissecting creatures and looking at their innards was not what I wanted to do.*

[54] **Flop** means (1) to fall with a sudden noise: *the books flopped onto the floor*; (2) to bend or collapse loosely or carelessly: *the puppy flopped down on the couch;* (3) (informal) to be a complete failure; be unsuccessful: *the film won critical acclaim but flopped at the box office*; (4) (slang) to go to sleep or be lodged: *to flop at a friend's house*; and (5) to swing loosely (as from one side or party to another), to bounce, to flap, etc.: *his long hair flops in his eyes when he runs; the dog's ears flopped when it ran.*

[55] **Slumber** is to sleep, especially lightly, to doze off. It also represents a state of inactivity, negligence or calm: *is the government in deep slumber over the issue of infrastructure development?*

Come morning and 'Knock! Knock!' I was disturbed in the midst of a beautiful dream during **REM.**[56] 'Who is this stupid . . .?' I yelled. It was Pappu, the garbage collector. I had a couple of alternatives: get up and greet him, or continue with my wonderful dream. The thought of having to sweep the room myself resolved my vacillation, and I dragged my feet to the door, muttering choicest curses, to let him in.

After this forced intermission, I tried to continue my beautiful dream, hoping it would **meander**[57] on delightfully. However, the dream, as if it had a life of its own, took off on a completely different **trajectory**[58] and the ending was particularly depressing. I woke up disgusted. But the floor looked cleaner and the WPB was empty. WPB empty! The packet of *pinnies*! Despairing, I ran out to trace Pappu. In the garbage pile at the back of the hostel, my *pinnies*—an expression of my mother's love—lay scattered and **despondent,**[59] and all because of my carelessness. And then I realized that the general store had taken back its principal, that too with compounded *interest*, as punishment!

[56] **REM** (abbreviation of rapid eye movement) refers to the rapidly shifting eye movements of the eyes beneath closed lids during the stage of sleep that is characterized by dreaming.

[57] **Meander** is to take a winding or indirect course: *the river meandered through the valley*. It also means to wander aimlessly; ramble: *the discussion meandered on for hours without reaching any conclusion.*

[58] **Trajectory** is the path of a projectile or other moving body through space. It also means a chosen or taken course: *after his diploma in public relations, his career took a different trajectory*.

[59] **Despondent** means feeling or showing profound hopelessness, dejection, discouragement, or gloom: *he was despondent about her failing health*.

Let me come back to yet another sophomore on a conquest through the **morass**[60] of life, the fairer sex, and the English language. Puneet Kapoor, a second-year industrial engineering student, was a humorist, and I would **devour**[61] his articles as my **constitutional**[62] for English. Here is an **excerpt**[63] from an article he wrote for the college magazine:

'I was going back to Shivalik Hostel on my bicycle while Miss Chamko was walking to her hallowed abode that is the Architecture Girls' Hostel. Seeing me she said: "Hi giant! Give me a lift on your Yamaha." Now, this was a direct affront, first of all to my diminutive size and, second, to my venerated bicycle which, in the truest tradition of family, had passed on from father to son.'

If your father gives you something, you are bound to

[60] **Morass** is a tract of low, soft, wet ground. It also means any confusing or troublesome situation, especially one from which it is difficult to free oneself: *a morass of doubt*.

[61] **Devour** is to swallow or eat up hungrily, voraciously or ravenously; to consume destructively, recklessly, or wantonly: *fire devoured the old museum*; to take in greedily with the senses or intellect: *to devour the works of Freud*; to absorb or engross wholly: *a mind devoured by superstition*.

[62] **Constitutional** besides its conventional meaning (of or relating to the constitution), also means belonging to or inherent in the character or make-up of a person's body or mind: *a constitutional weakness for sweets*; or *a constitutional inability to tell the truth*. It also means beneficial to one's mental or physical constitution; healthful: *reading editorials and a long morning walk are my daily constitutionals*.

[63] **Excerpt** means to take or select (a passage or quotation) from a book, speech, play, film, or the like; extract. It also means to abridge a book, speech, play, film, or the like by choosing representative sections. As a noun, the word *excerpt* refers to the passage or quotation selected or extracted, or the book, speech, play, or film abridged in this manner: *the magazine qualified that these are only edited excerpts from a much longer interview*.

respect it deeply. And this is exactly what Puneet meant by **venerated:** to give somebody or something the respect it deserves, to honour somebody in recognition of his excellence or holiness: *the best way to venerate your teachers is to follow and apply their teachings*. **Hallow** is to respect or venerate something because it is holy, pure. Puneet considered the girls' hostel hallowed because it housed girls (such a rare species in an engineering college). **Abode** is a place where a person lives. It represents a home, habitation, or even a place where one comes for a **sojourn**[64] or an extended stay.

My friend Puneet, I won't conceal, was 165 cm tall and generously proportioned. But while 165 cm is not considered tall for boys, it also cannot qualify as **diminutive:** something very small or unimportant. I wonder if it was Puneet's humility, underestimation of his stature, or his **self-deprecating**[65] style of humour that he called himself diminutive! You would agree that calling Puneet a giant and his venerable bicycle a Yamaha was a deliberate insult to him, and this explains why Puneet called it an **affront:** a deliberate insult, especially one done openly.

My friend Puneet's next encounter was with a beggar. This beggar's specialty was that he **donned**[66] multiple

[64] **Sojourn** means a temporary stay, a halt, break or stopover: *during his sojourn in Madrid, he visited all the famous art galleries.*

[65] **Deprecate** means to disapprove of, to deplore. It also means to think or speak of as being of little worth, to belittle, to depreciate. Isn't it amazing that one of the meanings of 'deprecate' and 'depreciate' is common and that is to 'belittle'.

[66] **Don** means to put on clothing. As a noun, it is (1) used as a courtesy title before the name of a man in a Spanish-speaking area; (2) a head, tutor, or fellow at a college under English universities; and (3) (in the mafia) a head of a family or syndicate.

disguises[67] in the course of **plying**[68] his 'trade' and in an attempt to enhance his job performance—his daily collections. One day, he would pretend to be a deaf and dumb person, another day a blind man. It was quite a coincidence that he **encountered**[69] Puneet on both these

[67] **Disguise** means a condition, manner or covering that serves or is intended for concealment of identity, character, intent or quality, to camouflage, to masquerade as someone else, etc: *noble words can be the disguise of base intentions*. It also refers to the make-up, mask, costume, or changed appearance of an entertainer: *a clown's disguise*; *Vishnu appeared in disguise as a saint*.

[68] **Ply** means to carry on, practise, or pursue busily or steadily: *to ply a trade*.

[69] I had originally used the word *confront* in place of *encounter*. My friend Jnanesh asked me to substitute it with encounter since confront has an element of premeditated hostility, when you take someone on with the intent of fighting or arguing.

days. My friend demonstrated his lingual expertise and his ability to spontaneously construct rhyming couplets about the illiterate beggar and addressed him:

"Go oh mendicant! Mend your ways mendacious!
Yesterday deaf, today blind, and still eyeing that girl vivacious!"

Mendicant, as you may have guessed, is a beggar. If the beggar changes his appearances on a daily basis, what does it tell you about his habits? The beggar is lying, making a false statement, which is exactly what **mendacious** also means: *to achieve political success, his methods were often mendacious or, more charitably, less than frank.*

The old mendicant is unable to disguise his desire for the vivacious girl. And since he is pretending to be blind, he can **ogle**[70] at her from behind his dark glasses without arousing suspicion. Vivacious comes from the Latin root vivax, vivac—'to live'—and so do vivid, convivial, revive, vivisection, and viviparous.

Vivid is full of life: a vivid scene or description. **Convivial** is literally to have a life together (the prefix 'con', a corruption of 'com', means 'together'). Hence, convivial means warm and friendly, welcoming and hospitable: *the convivial gathering at Christmas was full of joy, feasting, and fun.* **Revive** is to bring back to life (prefix re—'again'): *the patient was revived from a cardiac arrest as a result of timely medical intervention.*

Vivisection is the procedure of surgically making incisions in living animals, generally for the purpose of

[70] **Ogle** means to watch or observe someone or something by staring or gazing at it: *he ogled at the multi-million dollar yachts anchored in the bay and started drooling.*

physiological research. This word has an additional root (Latin *sectus*, past participle of *secāre*—'to cut') which gives us a new word **dissection**: to cut open (*dis*—'apart') a dead animal or a plant to examine and analyse its **anatomy.**[71] It also means to examine critically and minutely: *the analyst dissected the annual report of the corporate to discover clues of diversion of funds.* **Viviparous** are animals that directly give birth to young ones. The species Homo sapiens (surprisingly, a singular word and Latin for 'wise man') qualifies and so do whales. Incidentally, animals that lay eggs[72] are called **oviparous** ('ovi' comes from Latin *ovum*—'egg').

If you recall, a little while ago, I was **petrified**[73] at the thought of jeopardizing my thesis, since my actions had caused a bump on the head of my associate professor and thesis guide. The importance of a good thesis adviser is not lost even on a viviparous forest dweller, as you will see from what **transpired**[74] once in an **idyllic**[75] forest:

[71] **Anatomy** means the science dealing with the structure of animals and plants. It also refers to the structure itself of an animal or plant, or of any of its parts. Anatomy also means any detailed examination or analysis: *the topographical anatomy of the occupied territory must be absolutely clear to all before launching an attack.*

[72] Do you know which animal or bird lays the largest eggs? Did you say ostrich? No, it's the shark!

[73] **Petrify** literally means to convert into stone or stony substance. It also means to benumb or paralyse with astonishment, horror, or other strong emotion: *I was petrified with fear.*

[74] **Transpire** is to occur, happen, or take place: *several important events transpired last week.* It also means to become known, to come to light, to be revealed; *it transpired later that the patient had continued to consume alcohol during his treatment.*

[75] **Idyllic** means peaceful, calm, tranquil, relaxing, pleasant, and heavenly: *the idyllic surrounding of my garden resort got me into the*

SCENE: It's a fine sunny day in the forest, and a rabbit is sitting outside his burrow, tippy-tapping on his typewriter. Along comes a fox, out for a walk.

FOX: 'What are you working on?'

RABBIT: 'My thesis.'

FOX: 'Hmm. What's it about?'

RABBIT: 'Oh, I'm writing about how rabbits eat foxes.'
*(**Incredulous**[76] pause)*

FOX: 'That's ridiculous! Any fool knows that rabbits don't eat foxes.'

RABBIT: 'Sure they do and I can prove it. Come with me.'

They both disappear into the rabbit's burrow. After a few minutes, the rabbit returns, alone, and resumes typing. Along comes a wolf and stops to watch the hard-working rabbit.

WOLF: 'What's that you're writing?'

RABBIT: 'I'm doing a thesis on how rabbits eat wolves.'
*(Loud **guffaws**[77] from the wolf)*

WOLF: 'You don't expect to get such rubbish published, do you?'

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mood for poetry. Take out the last two letters from *idyllic* and you have a new word **idyll**: a poem or prose composition, usually describing pastoral scenes or events or any charmingly simple episode, appealing incident, or the like.

[76] **Incredulous** is something that indicates disbelief, scepticism, etc.: *an incredulous story on UFO landings in Wankhede stadium.*

[77] **Guffaw** is a hearty and boisterous burst of laughter: *he guffawed at the suggestive jokes of the illusionist.*

RABBIT: 'I won't have a problem. Do you want to see why?'

The rabbit and the wolf go into the burrow. Again, after a few minutes, the rabbit returns by himself, and goes back to typing.

SCENE INSIDE THE RABBIT'S BURROW: In one corner, there is a pile of fox bones. In another corner, there is a pile of wolf bones. On the other side of the burrow, a huge lion is ***belching***[78] *and picking his teeth . . .*

THE END

MORAL: It does not matter what you choose for a thesis subject. It does not matter what you use for data. What does matter is who you have for a thesis adviser.[79]

[78] **Belch** is to expel gas noisily from the stomach through the mouth; burp. It also means to erupt or explode or to forcefully expel something: *a volcano belching out lava.*

[79] David Joseph's contribution to www.write101.com, available online at www.write101.com/W.Tips243.htm, last accessed on 12 September 2012

3

DISCOVERING MNEMONICS

My sophomore year turned out to be extremely productive, as I made rapid **strides**[1] in the fields of vocabulary and pronunciation, attained a considerable level of fluency, and acquired some much-needed style in sentence construction. I also qualified for the college badminton team, submitted eleven articles for the college magazine (of which one was published and placed second in the category called 'Campus Rumpus'), and gained membership of the prestigious Chandigarh Club, where I planned to learn the game of tennis in my third year.

As I stepped into third year, I wondered if I would be able to beat my previous year's performance. I was also beginning to itch for some new techniques that could further boost my pace of learning. Little did I know that

[1] **Stride** (past tense 'strode') means (1) to walk with long steps, as with vigour, haste, impatience, or arrogance; (2) to take a long step: *to stride across a puddle; to stride a ditch*; (3) the distance covered by such a movement: *he was walking a stride or two ahead of the others*; and (4) a regular or steady course, pace, etc.

I would hit upon not one but two interesting ideas that would add another dimension to my research and fill me with excitement!

One day, I stumbled upon a couple of words where, after consulting the dictionary for their meanings, I wondered if I really needed to do so! In retrospect, the meanings were clearly evident from the way these words were constructed. I found these words *absey-book* and *abecedarian* in an article that advocated bridging the wide gap in the salaries of primary school teachers and teachers who taught senior classes in schools and colleges. In fact, the author was of the view that we should attract the best talent to groom the children when they are at their most impressionable age and, hence, offer the highest salaries to teachers who taught the tiniest tots.

The word **absey-book** represents a book of the English alphabet, which as we all know, starts with A-B-C, also known as a **primer.**[2] **Abecedarian** is a learner of the alphabet A-B-C or a beginner in any field. This word also refers to anything arranged in alphabetical order.

This approach looked promising and I was thrilled at the thought that it would be a walk in the park to learn thousands of words that were out of my reach till then. The only challenge, I almost immediately realized, was to somehow get hold of

[2] **Primer** is (1) an elementary book for teaching children to read; a book that covers the basic elements of a subject: *I need a primer on solar and wind energy before I attend the conference on this subject*; (2) a first coat or layer of paint given to any surface as a base or sealer to prepare it for painting; and (3) a device, such as a cap or a tube containing a small amount of explosive, for detonating the main explosive charge in a gun, mine, etc.

this **compendium**[3] of words. I excitedly ran into the room of my friend Avinash (fondly called Avi), a language nut and pronunciation guru, who, I was sure, would not only **laud**[4] me for this discovery but also massively expand my list that was merely two minutes old and a couple of words long.

This was a new concept for Avi too and he did not have a database of qualifying words for my ready consumption. But he was energized by this thought and offered to explore the massive word lists of *Barron's* GRE guide to dig out more words whose meanings were obvious from the way they were constructed. Both of us sat on his bed, running our eyes and our fingers over pages after pages of this guide in the hope of catching such words.

We had luck with words like **curio**: a valued, novel object, an object valued as a curiosity, often a collectible; **laggard**: a person or thing that moves too slowly, falls or lags behind, and **exigency**:[5] a case or situation that demands prompt action or remedy, an emergency. So, when we encountered the word *noisome*, we thought it would undoubtedly mean anything that produces some noise. It startled us with: 'I am not the one to produce harsh noise; in fact, I create foul smells.' **Noisome** means foul and offensive (as an odour) to the point of arousing disgust. It also means harmful or

[3] **Compendium** means a list, inventory, or collection of various items. It also means a concise but comprehensive summary, especially of an extensive subject: *thanks for compiling this fascinating compendium; it has shaken the cobwebs out of my memory.*

[4] **Laud** means to praise, extol, glorify, etc.: *those tracks simply do not belong in an album lauded as one of the greatest of all time.*

[5] **Exigency** means the need, demand, or requirement intrinsic to a circumstance, condition, etc.: *the exigencies of city life.*

injurious to health: *noisome fumes* ***billowing***[6] *from the nearby factory*.

Limpid, as a word, didn't seem weird at all especially when there was a *limp* involved. To our amusement, we discovered that **limpid** is completely delinked from *limp* and actually means clear and unclouded: *the limpid eyes of Kate Winslet*. I limped back to my room, my confidence shaken, though not completely whipped, after a couple of **faux pas**.[7] I resolved not to give up so easily on this new brand new discovery and sincerely hoped that it held the promise of a new revolution in learning techniques. Hence, when I came across *pellucid* a few days later, I confidently told myself it definitely had some linkage to being *pale*. **Pellucid** turned out to mean limpid, transparent, clear, and unclouded: *we could clearly see salmon swimming upstream in the pellucid waters of the river*.

On similar lines was the word **apologia**, which certainly looked like a statement of apology. But not to hazard a guess, I checked. Much to my **dismay**,[8] I discovered that it is a statement no doubt but one where, instead of asking for forgiveness, you defend something that you strongly believe in: *apologists of ragging say that it is important to*

[6] **Billow** is to rise up, surge, swell out, or cause to rise up or swell out: *a sudden wind made the tent billow alarmingly*.

[7] **Faux pas** is an embarrassing social blunder in etiquette, manners, or conduct. It is a French word that literally means 'false step': *unfortunately I made a faux pas, greeting Anne with the first thing that popped into my mind*.

[8] **Dismay** is to break down one's courage completely, as by sudden danger or trouble; dishearten thoroughly; daunt: *the surprise attack dismayed the enemy*. It also means to surprise such as to disillusion: *she was dismayed to learn of their disloyalty*.

go through ragging as it helps a boy become a man. Looks like we have discovered another contronym in the word *apology!*

So when I encountered the word *amphibology*, even though my heart still tempted me to believe that it means a study of amphibians (*animals that can live both on land as well as in water*), my mind pulled me towards the dictionary. My mind finally won over my heart and the animal lover in me felt a little sad that this word had no relation to amphibians at all! **Amphibology** means any ambiguous grammatical usage.

Some of the finest examples of amphibology are:

- *Our dog eats everything and loves children.*
- *Eat our curry; you won't get better!*
- *Teenagers shouldn't be allowed to drive; it's getting too dangerous on the streets* (So, are teenagers the ones in danger or the ones causing the danger?)
- There is a famous quote by Groucho Marx from the comedy *Animal Crackers—'I once shot an elephant in my pajamas'.* Uh, did he shoot the elephant while wearing **pajamas**[9] or was the elephant in his pajamas?
- This one takes the cake; it's a notice for a no parking zone—*Fine for Parking.*

During college, while my vocabulary was expanding rapidly, I would sometimes struggle to correctly recollect the meanings of some typically confusing word pairs.

[9] **Pajamas** are loose-fitting trousers, usually of silk or cotton, worn by both sexes in the Asian countries. The British spell this word as pyjamas.

These words, though they sounded similar, had contrasting meanings, often just the opposite of each other. The word pair *covert* and *overt* is an example. **Covert** means covered, concealed, or disguised: *covert operations of the army*. And **overt** means just the opposite: open to view or knowledge, not concealed or secret: *overt hostility between two nations over territorial boundaries*.

I would often **interchange the meanings**[10] of this word pair until I stumbled upon my second interesting idea. One day, after yet another unsuccessful revision of meanings of confusing word pairs like *covert* and *overt*, *compliment* and *complement*, etc., I dejectedly slumped on my bed, pouring out my angst at the complexity of this language. Once I was done with my outpourings, I covered my tired eyes with my hands and tried to memorize these words one last time by saying them and their meanings out loud to myself.

When I opened my eyes, exhausted from this repetition, I was still not sure if my hard work would result in a permanent fix of their meanings in my mind, or whether

[10] While I would often interchange the meanings of similar sounding words due to lack of their application in day-to-day matters, I came across a hilarious example of a person who did so out of habit. It was Mrs Malaprop, a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's comedy *The Rivals* (1775), whose name has given rise to the name of the habit **malapropism**. Her name was taken from the French *mal à propos*, which means *inappropriate* (*mal*–'bad' or 'wrongful' and *proposer*–'propose') and is typical of Sheridan's practice of concocting names to indicate the essence of a character. Thinking of the 'geography' of 'contiguous' countries, she spoke of the 'geometry' of 'contagious' countries, and hoped that her daughter might 'reprehend' (comprehend) the true meaning of what she said. She regretted that her 'affluence' (influence) over her niece was very small.

they would continue to be **transient**[11] guests of my memory bank. Suddenly, I had a eureka moment, and I jumped out of my bed and ran out—but not like Archimedes, who leapt out of his bathtub and ran naked through the streets of Syracuse! *Closing* and *opening* my eyes had somehow given me a new insight and an unmistakably permanent fix to this problem. I wondered how on earth I had not seen the obvious connection between covert / close and overt / open for such a long time!

What was also staring me in my face was the fact that the memory aid I used to remember these words was actually embedded in these words itself. This was a moment of redemption for the first technique that I had promptly discarded. As I applied myself further, I found that English offers an exhaustive collection of words that lend themselves to easy memorization, either due to their association with the context or even their rhyming with the meanings.

However, much to my dismay, I painfully discovered that this was not something history would uniquely attribute to me. The technique that assists memory and sharpens recall had already been discovered so long back that there was even an English word for it, **mnemonic**. Mnemonics could be created using multiple options like a verse, a formula, a rhyme, or an alliteration.

More research on this word led me to appreciate that it is named after Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess and Titaness of

[11] **Transient** means not lasting, enduring, or permanent; something transitory or ephemeral, that is lasting only a short time, existing briefly, temporary, etc.: *I marvel at the transient joys of childhood and especially when they are found in smallest of things or events.*

Here are some commonly used mnemonics:

- The order of planets in average distance from the Sun is Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and **Pluto**.[12] A simple and elegant mnemonic to remember this order is: My Very Easy Method: Just Set Up Nine Planets.
- The spelling of **rhythm** can be easily memorized using the sentence: Rhythm Helps Your Two Hips Move. Similarly, the sentence: A Rat In The House May Eat The Ice Cream can help remembering the tricky spelling of **arithmetic**.
- Remembering the direction of *longitude* (between north and south) is easier if you memorize that there is an 'N' in longitude and an 'N' in north. There is no 'N' in latitude and, hence, these lines must run between east and west.

memory. She was the mother of nine **Muses**,[13] the goddesses who preside over different streams of art and science and are considered the sources of knowledge in these fields

[12] Over the last few decades, powerful new ground- and space-based observatories have completely changed earlier understanding of the outer solar system. Pluto and its five moons are now known to be six of at least 70,000 large icy bodies that measure 100 km across or more in the Kuiper Belt. According to the International Astronomical Union's new rules of 2006, Pluto was excluded as a planet and added as a member of the new category 'dwarf planet' along with Eris and Cer.

[13] **Muses** remind me of their modern avatar **muse**, which means a source of inspiration or a guiding spirit for a poet, artist or a thinker. Given the background of the Muses, a modern-day muse is invariably a real woman who inspires creative endeavour in a person. As a verb, this word (from a different root) means (1) to be absorbed in one's thoughts; to meditate in silence, as on some subject; and (2) to consider or say thoughtfully: *Mom mused that it might take longer to drive than walk.*

(for instance, Urania: astronomy, Polyhymnia: religious music, Erato: lyrical, especially erotic, poetry). Since it was Mnemosyne who taught her daughters and gave them all the knowledge, naturally she deserved to be the goddess of memory.

My first mnemonic (second overall) after my rediscovery of this unique technique was the rather complex word **bacchanalia**. It is the name of the ancient Roman festival in honour of **Bacchus**,[14] the Greek god of wine, fertility, and revelry (also known as Dionysus). Bacchanalia also means a riotous, boisterous, or drunken feast or festivity. When I came across this word, I somehow recollected the 1984 Hindi movie *Sharaabi* (Hindi for 'drunkard'), in which the male **protagonist**[15] and acting legend Amitabh Bachchan was a drunkard. That day, I linked *bacchanalia* to Amitabh's surname *Bachchan* and his role as a drunkard and have never forgotten its meaning since. It's been twenty years.

With some more effort and help from generous friends like Avi, I managed to find many words that lend themselves to easy mnemonics. Let us sample a few, in no particular order:

Capacious is roomy, capable of holding much: *a capacious storage bin*. I found it much easier to remember this word once I rhymed *capacious* with *spacious*. **Parley** is to talk, confer,

[14] **Bacchus** comes from Greek *bakkhos*, perhaps related to Latin *bāca* or *bacca*—'berry, bead, or pearl'.

[15] **Protagonist** means (1) the leading character, hero, or heroine of a drama or other literary work; (2) a proponent for or advocate of a political cause, social programme, etc.; (3) the leader or principal person in a movement, cause, etc.; and (4) the first actor in ancient Greek drama, who played not only the main role, but also other roles when the main character was offstage: *whenever his books feature a child protagonist, that protagonist is always a girl.*

or discuss: *the players had a parley before the big game*. It is also an informal meeting or conference between enemies or opponents to work out the terms of **truce**,[16] surrender, or peace. This is a fairly common word and we used it practically every day in our college hostel. Relax! I am talking about its version **shorn**[17] of the letter 'y', the biscuit brand Parle-G, which we frequently dipped in hot *chai* and consumed in **copious**[18] quantities. Parle can serve as a mnemonic for *parley* if you can visualize a *parley* where Parle biscuits are served. Incidentally, Parle Products—maker of Parle-G, the largest selling biscuit in the world—also launched **Prudent**, a brand of toothpaste. Unfortunately, this brand couldn't quite carve a niche for itself, in the presence of established brands like

[16] **Truce** is a temporary agreement to stop fighting. It also means a respite from a disagreeable state of affairs: *the question that bothers the citizens of the warring nations is how likely are rank and file members to violate a truce negotiated by their leaders*.

[17] **Shorn** is a past participle of shear. **Shear** is (1) to remove (fleece, hair, wool) by cutting or clipping with a sharp instrument: *to shear wool from sheep*; (2) to strip, divest, or deprive as if by cutting (usually followed by 'of'): *he was shorn of his power*; and (3) to travel through or progress by or as if by cutting: *the swifts sheared the air and soared up in the sky*; *the cruiser sheared through the water*. In mechanics and geology, shear means to become fractured along a plane as a result of forces acting parallel to the plane. As a noun, shears (usually used in plural) are large scissors (usually used with 'pair of') or any of various other cutting implements or machines having two blades that resemble or suggest those of scissors.

[18] **Copious** means (1) large in quantity or number; abundant; plentiful: *copious amounts of food; copious rainfall*; (2) having or yielding an abundant supply: *a copious harvest*; and (3) exhibiting abundance or fullness, as of thoughts, information, or matter; profuse in words, expression, or style: *he is a copious talker but his content is original and refreshing*.

Colgate, Pepsodent, and Close-Up. Hence, Parle Products thought it was *prudent* to withdraw their *Prudent* brand from this space. This line shall serve as a good mnemonic given that *prudent* means acting with care and foresight or having good judgement.

Quintessential is the chief, purest, or best part of anything: *the quintessence of the book was missing from the movie based on it*. Coming to aid is a rhyming word essential, as quintessential is the most *essential* portion of anything. Quintessential is a very interesting word in its own right. It came via French from medieval Latin *quinta essentia*—'the fifth essence'. In ancient and medieval philosophy, ether (the 'fifth' fabled and highest 'essence' or element after earth, water, air, and fire) was thought to be the source of all matter and the space in which it exists. Ether, whose extraction was one of the chief goals of alchemy, was added as the fifth element (quintessence) by Aristotle. Aristotle reasoned that whereas fire, earth, air, and water were earthly and corruptible, since no changes had been perceived in the heavenly regions, the stars cannot be made out of any of the four elements but must be made of a different, unchangeable, heavenly substance.

Rotunda is a *circular* building or a hall that usually has a dome on the top. If the letters 't' and 'a' are shelved from rotunda, what remains ('round') would be an approximate qualifier of the word and a quick memory aid. There is an infertility clinic in a Mumbai suburb by the name Rotunda perhaps alluding to the round (or rotund) bellies of most of the patients, after successful treatment!

Sallow relates to an unhealthy, yellowish complexion: *she had a sallow complexion and several marks of chickenpox on her face*

and neck. How about rhyming *sallow* with *yellow*? **Scurry** is to run quickly or hastily: *the squirrel spotted a nut and scurried across the lawn*. Relate *scurry* to *hurry* then.

Sundries are small, miscellaneous items or jobs of little value: *the pet shop now sells only pet sundries—but not live animals—after pressure from an interest group called Crusaders for Natural Habitat*. On Sundays, we get respite from our daily routine but often there is no respite from work. Sunday is for sundries! The word *protem* lends itself to an easy mnemonic. A reversal in the order of *pro* and *tem* and a slight shuffle in the spelling of *pro* could result in *tempor*. **Protem** means *'tempor'ary*; for the time being: *The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China is the world's biggest bank protem*. It comes from Latin *pro tempore*—'for the time being'.

It is a custom in many countries that when a very high-ranking official or a famous person goes to his heavenly abode, twenty-one shells are fired from a *cannon* at the time of his funeral, as a mark of *respect*. In English, **canonize** means to glorify, to consider or treat as sacrosanct or holy: *they canonized the book of his sermons*. In ecclesiastical *(of or pertaining to the church or the clergy)* terms, to canonize means to declare after a death of a person that he or she has to be remembered and *respected* like a saint. It is an order from the church. The word canonize has, in fact, cropped up from *canon*, a fundamental principle or general rule or law, especially of a religious faith *(canon of good behaviour)*. As a mnemonic, you can associate *canonize* from *cannon* (with a double 'n') due to the underlying common theme of *respect*.

Entente and détente are French words with typical French pronunciations ('ahn-**tahnt'** and 'dey-**tahnt**', respectively) and they mean friendly relations between two countries. The only difference is that the relations have always been friendly

in *entente* and improved after initial differences in *détente*. The mnemonic is to remember that 'd' in *détente* stands for the initial differences while 'e' in *entente* signifies sweet relations for ever.

Plaint is the accusation or charge made against somebody in a civil court. So, *plaint* can be easily remembered by associating it with a similar word *complaint*: *the dissatisfied owners of an apartment complex filed a plaint against the builder for using poor quality construction materials*. Plaint also means a loud cry (or repeated cries) of pain or rage or sorrow: *the pitiful plaints of the lamenting relatives of the deceased person could be heard throughout the emergency ward of the hospital*.

Herald refers to a person or thing that gives news, **proclaims**,[19] or announces: *a good newspaper should be a herald of truth*. Herald was formerly a royal messenger, especially, one representing a monarch in an ambassadorial capacity during wartime. We can also use this word as a verb: *an aggressive marketing campaign to herald a new film*. Herald also means a person or thing that precedes or comes before, a harbinger: *the returning swallows are heralds of spring*. The moment I read the first line of the definition of this word in the online dictionary, I had a mnemonic ringing in my head. The mnemonic is the **International 'Herald' Tribune**, a popular newspaper printed at thirty-five sites around the world and sold in 180 countries. Herald is an apt

[19] **Proclaim** means (1) to announce or declare in an official or formal manner, or in an open or ostentatious way: *to proclaim war; to proclaim one's opinions*; (2) to extol or praise publicly: *let them proclaim the lord*; and (3) to **denounce** (to condemn or censure openly or publicly) or prohibit publicly; to declare someone to be an outlaw, an evildoer.

word to be the name or a part of the name for a newspaper since it is the person or a thing that gives, proclaims, or announces news.

Interchanging the words *complement* and *compliment* (or their adjective forms *complementary* and *complimentary*) in a conversation was okay, because of near-identical pronunciations. However, in writing, they caused much grief because of different meanings.

Complement means (1) something that completes, makes up a whole, or makes perfect: *a good wine is a complement to a good meal*; (2) the quantity or number needed to complete or make up a whole: *we now have a full complement of science fiction books*; and (3) either of two parts or things needed to complete the whole: *their skills are complementary and they make a great start-up team*.

Compliment is (1) an expression of praise, admiration, or congratulation: *a sincere compliment boosts one's morale*; (2) courteous greeting, good wishes, and regards: *please extend my compliments to your parents*; and (3) to show fondness, regard, or respect for by giving a gift or performing a favour: *please accept this wine with our compliments*.

I continued to struggle hoping that I would learn with practice and time. When these hopes let me down, I went looking for mnemonic aids. I found *complement* relatively easy once I associated it with 'complete'. More time went by and with the arrival of the festive season came the boxes of dry fruit and chocolates in our office with 'compliments' from our clients. Some clients even sent 'complimentary' messages on emails or their letterheads appreciating the efforts of our staff for taking excellent care of their needs through the year.

The mnemonic still eludes me but whenever confusion begins to strike, I recollect 'complete' for 'complementary' and 'complimentary emails and gifts from clients'. This recollection helps me to immediately **collect**[20] my thoughts and select the correct word to extend my own 'compliments' to the team for winning a full 'complement' of industry awards.

The word *fortis* rang a bell when I first heard it in 2001. Fortis is associated with healthcare and runs a large chain of multi-specialty hospitals in India and overseas. I was surprised to note that this word does not exist in English lexicon, but still sounded remarkably apt for the kind of services Fortis offered. I soon discovered why. I was relating it to 'fortify', a word I had heard so often in advertisements of health foods and drinks. Health foods and drinks are marketed with claims of being fortified with proteins, vitamins, iron, iodine, and other essential elements to support the growth of our body and mind. Thus far, I had ignored this word. This time, I checked.

The word *fortify* derives from *fort* and truly exemplifies what forts were meant to be—strong and equipped with weapons, food supplies, and soldiers. Thus, if A is fortified with B, A gets further strengthened, enriched, and reinforced. For instance, table salt is fortified with iodine, rice with vitamin B complex, wheat flour with iron, ghee with vitamins A and D, and health drinks for kids with virtually everything that is known to be beneficial. While I am not an advocate of fortified food (unless the doctor advises) and wonder why we need to resort to fortification if we take a well-balanced

[20] **Collect**, besides its simpler meanings, also means to regain control of oneself or one's thoughts, faculties, composure, or the like: *at the news of her promotion, she took a few minutes to collect herself.*

diet, I am pleased to have two mnemonic aids for this word: fort and fortis. This is also the first time where I discovered a word through its mnemonic and not the other way round.

Stalactite and **stalagmite** are deposits, usually of calcium carbonate, and shaped like icicles. They are formed by the dripping of **percolating**[21] **calcareous**[22] water. However, in the case of *stalactites*, these deposits hang from the ceiling of a cave while *stalagmites* grow up from its floor. Well-formed deposits over a long period are an amazing sight. I had the pleasure of this experience (and the first exposure to these two words) when I visited Luray Caverns in the US (www.luraycaverns.com) way back in 1998.

Since then, I had struggled to remember which one hangs from the ceiling and which one is formed on the ground. Recently, my friend Rajiv Rai, a veteran banker and accomplished quizzer, pointed to the mnemonics hidden in these words itself—stalactites hang from the ceiling, while stalagmites grow up from the ground and mite (might) reach the ceiling.

Rajiv also challenged me to locate the obvious mnemonic in the words 'dromedary' and 'bactrian', the camels with a single and double hump, respectively. After racking my brains for what seemed like ages, I gave up. I was very sure that this

[21] **Percolate** means (1) to cause a liquid to pass through a porous substance; to filter, ooze, seep, or trickle: *hot water percolated slowly through the coffee powder producing a rich aroma of Robusta coffee*; (2) to become active, lively, or spirited; and (3) to grow or spread gradually; to germinate: *interest in the idea has begun to percolate*. It is after reading this definition that I finally understood why a coffee making machine is often called a 'coffee percolator'.

[22] **Calcareous** means containing or like calcium carbonate.

time Rajiv was clearly **muddled.**[23] In a moment of new-found confidence, I was about to put the muscle of money behind a bet, when my inherent **disdain**[24] for gambling took over, and I backed out. When he revealed the solution to me, the only thing I wanted to do was to beat my *capitis* (Latin for 'head'). I had to merely capitalize the first letter in both the words, and a single hump of 'D' (dromedary) and a double hump of 'B' (Bactrian) were staring at me!

[23] **Muddle** means to mix up in a confused or bungling manner, to jumble: *his thoughts got muddled after a drink too many.*

[24] **Disdain** means to look upon or treat with contempt; despise; scorn: *she expressed disdain at the adulation the industry gives to beauty over talent, blaming it on the influence of the academy awards*. It also means to think unworthy of notice, response; to consider or reject as beneath oneself: *he harbours a deep disdain for famous actors as he believes they get attention and compensation far in excess of their talent.*

4

MY FRIEND AVINASH

My third year of engineering was well on its way to prove itself another stellar year, even though my academic grades had slipped further from the modified resolve to stay in the top 15 per cent of the class. I was now comfortable among the top 25 per cent as long as I ensured that I qualified for the Bachelor of Engineering degree with 'Honours' suffixed to it. I was also regular with my tennis practice and, with great difficulty, my **backhand**[1] returns and **overhead**[2] serves were

[1] **Backhand** means a stroke or slap made with the palm of the hand turned toward the body and the back of the hand turned in the direction of the stroke or slap. In tennis, squash, etc. a backhand is a stroke made across the body, from the side of the body opposite that of the hand holding the racket, paddle, etc. This word also means oblique or ambiguous in meaning, indirect, insincere, or malicious: *backhanded methods; a backhanded compliment.*

[2] **Overhead** means (1) situated, operating, or passing above, aloft, up in the air or sky, especially near the zenith, or over one's head: *an overhead locker; an overhead projector; a cloud overhead*; (2) to be completely submerged or deeply involved: *to plunge overhead in water; to sink overhead in debt*; (3) of or pertaining to the general cost of manufacturing or running a business as rent, lighting, and heating

now getting into the other side of the court more often than into the net or outside the boundary lines.

Mnemonics were proving very handy, not only in expanding my vocabulary and improving my spellings, but also in memorizing the tougher concepts of engineering subjects like 'theory of machines' and 'strength of materials'.

At this stage, my friend Avi added yet another dimension to my research on the English language. He gave me an engaging pastime and a new hobby. I gleefully concluded that he was beginning to take a lot more interest in my welfare. Possibly, after such hard work in the first five semesters of our course, he was convinced that learning English was not a passing fad for me. Moreover, I had already reached a stage where I contributed to his pursuit of advancement in language skills.

English trivia was an altogether new concept for me when Avi planted its seeds in my mind. He began by asking an innocuous sounding question. He tasked me to list all the words I could think of, which had the letter 'Q' but not followed by the letter 'U'. I had to disregard acronyms such as NASDAQ (National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotation System) and words **naturalized**[3] from

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expenses, which cannot be charged or attributed to a specific product or part of the work operation: *overhead expenses; an overhead charge*; and (4) (in racket sports) a stroke in which the ball or shuttlecock is hit with a downward motion from above the head; smash.

[3] **Naturalize** means (1) to confer upon a foreign national the rights and privileges of a citizen; (2) to introduce organisms into a region and cause them to flourish as if native; (3) to introduce or adopt foreign practices, words, etc. into a country or into general use: *to naturalize a French phrase*; and (4) to adapt or accustom, as if native, to a place or to new surroundings: *alpaca, a native of South America that resembles a small llama in appearance, has been successfully naturalized in many parts of New Zealand.*

Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, or other languages that do not use the English alphabet. Some such words are *burqa* (a veiled garment worn by Muslim women), *faqir* (a Muslim ascetic), *talaq* (a form of Muslim divorce), *waqf* (a charitable trust in Islamic law), and *qabalah* (a form of Jewish mysticism).

I hastily concluded that there were many right answers to the question but found myself struggling for answers. I even tried digging in the deepest **recesses**[4] of my memory and was soon dismayed when I realized the limited number of 'Q'-initiated or 'Q'-embedded words lodged in my long-term memory. After much agony, I finally came up with Qantas, the name of the national airline of Australia, and hoped for at least partial salvation. This stumped Avi but only briefly and, adhering to the unwritten rule of ignoring proper nouns, I dismissed this discovery and moved on. Incidentally, Qantas is an acronym, Q standing for Queensland (which, in fact does have a 'u') and the rest expanding into 'And Northern Territory Aerial Services Ltd).

This investigation continues unaccomplished to this day, even after turning to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* for help in a state of desperation. Meanwhile, prompted by dear Avi, I managed to complete several other investigations. For instance, he challenged me to locate the word that has the highest number of multiple meanings. To my amazement, I discovered that several words have numerous different meanings—well into

[4] **Recess** means (1) temporary withdrawal or stoppage from usual work or activity and a period of such withdrawal: *the school has two recesses for older children, giving them adequate time for a snack and a meal*; (2) an indentation or small hollow; a receding part or space, as a bay, or an alcove in a room; *the old bungalow had adequate recesses in each room for a cupboard and a fireplace*; and (3) a remote, secret, secluded or inner area or place (often used in the plural): *my searchlight was too weak to penetrate the darkest recesses of the cave.*

the tens and twenties in many cases. However, the word that takes the cake is 'set'. This word has fifty-eight noun uses, 126 verb uses, and ten uses as an adjective!

Here are a few samples of the varying meanings of 'set':

- To put a price or value on something: *He set Rs 2,00,000 as the right price for the second-hand car; the teacher sets a high value on discipline and neatness.*
- To put something or someone in a particular place, position, or desired order
- To place the hair, especially when wet, on rollers or in clips, so that the hair will assume a particular style
- To become firm, solid, or permanent, as mortar, glue, cement, or a dye, due to drying or physical or chemical change: *The milk set into curd within a couple of hours.*
- A collection of articles designed for use together or where each unit is adapted for a special use in a particular operation: *a set of china; a chess set; a set of golf clubs; a set of carving knives.*
- A number, group, or combination of things of similar nature, design, or function: *a set of ideas.*
- In tennis, a unit of a match, consisting of a group of not fewer than six games with a margin of at least two games between winner and loser: *He won the match in straight sets of 6–2, 6–3, 6–2.*
- A construction representing a place or scene in which the action takes place in a stage, film, or TV production: *An elaborate set was erected for the finale of the reality show.*
- Something fixed or rigid: *a set smile.*
- Someone resolved or determined; habitually or stubbornly fixed: *to be set in one's opinions.*

- Completely prepared; ready: *Is everyone set?* Also used as an interjection in calling the start of a race: *On your marks . . . Get set . . . Go!*
- To set forward, to turn the hands of a watch or clock to show a later time: *When your plane lands in Melbourne, set your watch forward five hours.*
- To cause to pass into a given state or condition: *to set one's mind at rest; to set a prisoner free.*
- To get something or someone noticed; distinguish: *Her bright red hair sets her apart from her sisters.*
- To post, station, or appoint for the purpose of performing some duty: *to set spies on a person.*

We also researched the longest words in English. We found that in England, in the late nineteenth century, the church wielded considerable influence over matters relating to the state. Prime Minister William Gladstone tried to **dissociate** (distance, detach, disestablish) the authority of the church and add considerable powers to his own office. There was a tremendous public outcry against this move and soon his decision was **overwhelmed.**[5] Out of this episode was born the word *antidisestablishmentarianism* (28 letters).

[5] **Overwhelm** means to overpower, overcome, or overturn especially with superior forces. It also means to overcome completely in mind or feeling: *he was overwhelmed by the news of death of his fellow comrade.* It also means to cover or bury beneath a mass of something, as floodwaters, debris, or an avalanche; submerge: *lava from the erupting Vesuvius overwhelmed the city of Pompeii.* To overwhelm is also to load, heap, treat, or address with an overpowering or excessive amount of anything: *a child overwhelmed with presents; to overwhelm someone with questions.*

After some more effort, we discovered an even longer word, ***floccinaucinihilipilification***[6] (29 letters), which is an act or instance of estimating, or judging something as worthless or trivial. However, how could we feel satiated when *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* (34 letters) was just round the corner, waiting to be discovered? This is, of course, a made-up word meaning 'fantastic' and used by children to express approval. It was popularized by the 1964 classic film *Mary Poppins* starring Julie Andrews.

There are some people, we discovered, who do not appreciate such long words—they actually fear them. English has a special word to express the fear of long words. The word is *hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia* (35 letters), and ironically it is one of the longest words in the English language.

Unfortunately, the medical fraternity was not convinced by my statement. 'What about *pneumono-ultramicroscopic-silico-volcano-coneosis* [45 letters]?' asked my friend Sudhir, who was pursuing his third year of MBBS. I vehemently protested as, strictly speaking, it is not a single word, but a combination of six words to describe a disease that **manifests**[7] itself as volcano-like eruptions in the lungs, caused by very fine (ultra-microscopic) silicate or quartz dust.

[6] **Floccinaucinihilipilification** originated in 1741 as a combination of four Latin words (*flocci, nauci, nihili, pilifi*) all signifying 'at a small price' or 'for nothing', and listed together in a rule of the well-known book *The Eton Latin Grammar*. The word is said to have been invented by a student of Eton College as a joke.

[7] **Manifest** means readily perceived by the eye or the understanding, evident, obvious, apparent, plain: *a manifest error*. Manifest also means a list or invoice of goods transported by truck or train, a list of the cargo or passengers carried on an airplane or a ship.

'Can you form words without vowels?' Avi asked me one day. Childhood lessons in English had convinced me that vowels are an absolute must for the construction of words and that there could be no exceptions to this rule. But English is a language of exceptions, as all of us had discovered in school itself. So when Avi posed this question, I did not **flinch**[8] in disbelief. Yet, after focused research, I did conclude that he had sent me on a wild goose chase and that the presence of vowel/s in all English words was indeed a cardinal rule.

'Why give up so easily? Keep trying . . . When you bust this myth, come back,' he said, blending caution with encouragement. I am sure you, my readers, will help me rediscover many such words that I went to Avi's room with and even help me expand that list. Incidentally, some examples are embedded in this chapter itself.

When I went to meet Avi with my list of ten such words, he first expanded it to twenty-eight, adding even six- and seven-lettered words! Then he began his discourse: 'On the one hand, we find words that like to be **frugal**[9] with the use of vowels and, on the other, there are words that do not seem to have their fill of vowels.' He continued: 'I am sure that we cannot construct words that comprise only vowels but there definitely are words with more vowels than consonants. Ignoring single-letter words like 'I' or 'A', let me know the

[8] **Flinch** means to draw back or shrink from what is dangerous, difficult, or unpleasant. It also means to shrink under pain; wince: *military men who never flinched at the roar of rifles shook at the prospect of facing the press.*

[9] **Frugal** is economical in use of material resources or expenditure of money; not wasteful: *what your office needs is a frugal manager who can save you money without resorting to painful cutbacks.* It also means costing little, inexpensive: *a frugal meal.*

words that have 80 per cent or more of their letters as vowels.' He gave me this new assignment for the week and signed off. As a parting shot, he said: 'There is another interesting word "antidisinhibiting" where, of the seven vowels used, 'i' appears six times!'

My mind, which had recently been tuned to think about consonants, suddenly took a U-turn and started visualizing words with a **preponderance**[10] of vowels. I welcome your contribution, as Avi will not mind my expanding my initial response of four such words (shared at the end of this chapter), even if I get back to him after twenty years of being asked this one.

Once Avi was satisfied with my general progress in English trivia, he went on to words that have their fun with letters in many other ways. He asked, 'Do you notice anything common in words like **abstemious**,[11] **abstentious**,[12] **adventitious**,[13] and **facetious**?[14] When the commonness refused to reveal itself

[10] **Preponderance** is the fact or quality of being preponderant or superior in weight, power, numbers, etc.: *the preponderance of votes is against the proposal.*

[11] **Abstemious** means one who abstains, and is sparing or moderate in eating and drinking. It also means characterized by abstinence or moderation: *the hermit led an abstemious way of life.*

[12] **Abstentious** means characterized by abstinence, self-restraining; withholding of a vote: *The majority of the public abstained from voting when their favoured candidate withdrew from the contest, citing personal reasons.*

[13] **Adventitious** means associated with something by chance rather than as an integral part, extrinsic. In biology, it refers to a structure that develops in an abnormal and unusual position or place, say stem, branch, leaf, root, etc.

[14] **Facetious** means not meant to be taken seriously or literally, something amusing or humorous: *a facetious remark.*

even after a lot of focus and effort, he simplified my quest by throwing a hint. 'Look at the uniqueness in the way vowels are used in these words,' he directed. Sure, after some more time, I realized that these are words where vowels appear in alphabetical order (a, e, i, o, u).

Avi added to this insight by giving examples of words like *subcontinental*, *uncomplimentary*, *unnoticeably*, *unoriental*, and *unproprietary* where vowels appear in exactly the reverse order (u, o, i, e, a).

I left that day with another assignment on words that are called *isograms* and are interesting for a unique reason. **Isograms** are words in which no letter of the alphabet appears more than once. I am sure you can resist the temptation of checking out some examples of large isograms at the end of the chapter and spend time discovering some on your own.

After the assignment on isograms, Avi moved on to make me wonder which words and letters appear most frequently in our everyday usage. He shared what he had recently discovered: 'The most frequently used word in written English is the one that is right at the beginning of this sentence—"the". And "I" is the most commonly used word in conversations.' He added, 'As for letters, it does not take too much to conclude that the most commonly used letters must be the five vowels.' He said this with the confidence of having successfully read my mind. He was right. I now knew that, barring a few exceptions, consonants must bind with vowels to form words and that is why one or more are present in all English words.

'Well, we are only partly right on this one,' he admitted, as if he were party to this faulty conclusion. 'The most commonly used letter is indeed a vowel—the letter "E". However, in second place is actually a consonant—the letter "T". The

two least used letters are "Q" and "Z", in that order.' For my convenience and consumption, he spread before me the entire sequence of letters in decreasing order of usage:

E-T-A-O-I-N-S-R-H-L-D-C-U-M-F-P-G-W-Y-B-V-K-X-J-Q-Z[15]

With this information in our minds, isn't it amazing that, in 1939, Ernest Vincent Wright wrote a 50,000-word novel without the letter E (except in his own name)? Though self-published and little-noticed in its time, *Gadsby* is now a favourite among fans of constrained writing and is a sought-after rarity among book collectors. Later editions of the book sometimes carry a subtitle: *50,000 Word Novel without the Letter E.*

In the absence of the fantastic Internet search facilities and numerous online dictionaries available today, one can't even begin to imagine the pains a 1930s author would have gone through, to search for appropriate synonyms of words that contain E. Therefore, I was confident that this outstanding effort would stand out for **posterity**[16] as a unique work of its kind. However, I was amazed to discover that he had company even in such an **esoteric**[17] adventure!

In 1969, a Frenchman called Georges Perec managed to repeat this feat by writing a full-length 300-page novel called

[15] http://www.letterfrequency.org, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[16] **Posterity** means succeeding or future generations collectively: *the death-defying stunt was captured on camera for posterity*. It also means all descendants of one person: *his fortune was gradually dissipated by his posterity*.

[17] **Esoteric** means to be understood by or meant for only the select few who have special knowledge or interest in the subject: *semiology, the study of signs and symbols, is an esoteric subject*.

La Disparition in French. Any guesses about the letter he chose to omit? It was E yet again and, coincidentally, it was present in the author's name this time too.

What finally bowled me over was the discovery that the English language even has a word to describe a written work that doesn't use one or more specific alphabetic characters—**lipogram**!

'Have you heard of words that read just the same if read from left to right (conventional way) or right to left?' Avi asked me. He explained that these funny words are called **palindromes**. He gave me words like *noon*, *rotator*, *redivider*, and *Malayalam* as fine examples. Can you find a longer palindrome? Match your discovery with mine at the end of this chapter.

'Palindromes are not limited to words alone. Even phrases and complete sentences could be read both ways, especially if one disregards punctuation,' Avi clarified. 'For instance "*Madam, I'm Adam*" or, its longer version, "*Madam in Eden, I'm Adam*" are palindromic. Another great example is a German saying "*bei lied lieh stets heil die lieb*" meaning "in trouble, love was always a comfort to them".' He suggested, 'Making your own palindromes can be equally funny.' His personal favourite was: '*Was it a car or a cat I saw?*'

'The word palindrome befittingly comes from Latin *palin*—"back, again" and *dromos*—"a running". Interestingly, the fear of palindromes is called **aibohphobia**, a palindrome itself.' He signed off with this bit of fascinating trivia.

One day, he came to my room and asked: 'Did you know that the word **motel** was formed in 1920s by combining motor and hotel?' For sure, I knew that a motel is a hotel that gives you lodging as well as a car parking facility. We discussed several other similar words: **smog** is a phenomenon seen

in pollution-ridden cities during cooler evenings, when fog entraps smoke near the surface, and is literally a combination of smoke plus fog; **travelogue** comes from a combination of travel and monologue; **avionics** from aviation and electronics; **pulsar** is a pulsating star; and **brunch** comes from breakfast plus lunch.

I did not know, but he told me that these words are referred to as *portmanteau* words.

'**Portmanteau** is a large travelling case, which opens out into two equal compartments. It originated from French *porter*—"to carry" and *manteau*—"a cloak"; it was a travelling case meant to carry a **cloak.**[18] Amusingly, it also refers to words formed as a result of the union of two different words.' He also cautioned: 'Some people mistakenly believe that **scam**, the word for a scandal that involves money, is also a portmanteau word (combination of scandal and money). However compelling it may seem, it's not correct. Scam is a word of obscure origin.'

'*Mandatory option* is a striking example of an oxymoron.' Avi began a discussion one day with this **confounding**[19] statement. 'Good grief!' I exclaimed. 'What's an oxymoron?' Avi clarified: 'If you break up the word oxymoron and refer to its etymology, you'll come up with *intelligent fool* (Greek *oxus*—"sharp, intelligent, clever" and *moros* or *moron*—"fool, dull"). Thus, an **oxymoron** is a figure of

[18] **Cloak** is a loose outer garment, such as a cape or coat. It also means something that covers or conceals: *he conducts his affairs under a cloak of secrecy.*

[19] **Confound** means to perplex or amaze, especially by a sudden disturbance or surprise; bewilder; confuse: *Germany has often confounded its critics by continuing to attract foreign investment despite high wage costs.*

speech in which two incongruous, contradictory terms are combined: *he was cruel only to be kind*; or *she is just a poor little rich girl*.'

Avi added: 'Wholesome, sophomore (etymologically "wise fool"), spendthrift, bridegroom, pianoforte (etymologically "soft loud"), superette (super meaning big and ette meaning small), old news, pretty ugly, original copy, small crowd, seriously funny, only choice, standard deviation, bitter sweet, modern tradition (or history), small fortune, negative growth, build down, irate patient, junior senator, long recess, long brief (for lawyers), mutually exclusive, and fresh frozen jumbo shrimp are all fine examples of oxymorons.'

'As a matter of fact, *good grief* is an oxymoron too!' he chuckled. As soon as I got it, we both burst into peals of laughter.

My assignments as submitted to Avi:

Some words that do not use any vowels whatsoever are:
Two-letter words: by, my
Three-letter words: cry, cwm, fly, fry, sky, try, why, wry
Four-letter words: cyst, hymn, lynx, myth
Five-letter words: crwth, crypt, gypsy, lymph, lynch, nymph, psych, pygmy, tryst, wryly
Six-letter words: rhythm, **syzygy**[20]

[20] **Syzygy**: In astronomy, an alignment of three celestial objects, as the sun, the earth, and either the moon or a planet. Syzygy in the sun–earth–moon system occurs at the time of the full moon and the new moon.

Seven-letter words: **nymphly,**[21] rhythms
Eight-letter words: There are none to my knowledge; however, there is a rather long word of nine letters that just uses one vowel and that word is 'strengths'.

If you look carefully, there is a common thread running through most of these words without vowels—the presence of 'Y'. You will be surprised to know that Olden English had one extra vowel and so, only twenty consonants, as 'Y' was classified as a vowel. Along the way, 'Y' got absorbed as a consonant, which may have been a rather arbitrary decision since the letter is more often used as a vowel. For instance, in all of the above examples, 'Y' clearly acts as a vowel. However, there are a few words like *youth* and *yesterday*, where 'Y' sounds like a consonant. I assume that since there was no other English letter that could replicate its consonant sound, it was shifted to the list of consonants.

Very rarely though, but even the letter 'W' has performed dual roles of a consonant and a vowel. You may not have come across these words unless you are a citizen of Wales or a student of Welsh. 'W' acts as a vowel in the Welsh word **cwm**[22] (pronounced 'koom') that means a valley. 'W' also acts as a vowel in the word **crwth**, a Welsh musical instrument.

[21] **Nymphly** means resembling, or characteristic of, a **nymph** (a beautiful or graceful young woman, one of the numerous classes of lesser deities of mythology, conceived of as beautiful maidens inhabiting the sea, rivers, woods, trees, mountains, meadows, etc. and frequently mentioned as attending on a superior deity.)

[22] **Cwm**, more accurately, is a steep, bowl-shaped hollow occurring at the upper end of a mountain valley, especially one forming the head of a glacier or stream. But this is too complicated to remember, with or without a mnemonic.

The maximum concentration of vowels in a word that I have been able to discover so far is 83.34 per cent. This special word is **oeuvre** and is used to refer to the complete works of a writer, painter, etc.: *the entire surviving oeuvre of the painter is on display at the Museum of Modern Art*. Words like *video*, *audio*, and *eerie* come a close second with 80 per cent vowels.

Some of the longest English isograms are *uncopyrightable* (15 letters) and ***ambidextrously***[23] (14 letters), and some less well-known words like ***dermatoglyphics***[24] (15 letters), hydropneumatics (14 letters), and misconjugatedly (15 letters).

The longest palindrome in English is *detartrated* (11 letters), a term used in chemistry. If you allow a small concession and ignore the last letter of the word *sensuousness* (12 letters), you have your longest palindrome in English.

[23] This word has been explained in the chapter titled 'Dr Pandu Piplani'; keep reading!

[24] **Dermatoglyphics** is the science of fingerprinting.

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THE TATA NAGAR WHEELER DEALER[1]

Towards the middle of the final year of engineering, I was reasonably fluent. My vocabulary had expanded dramatically but most of the gains came from an increase in passive vocabulary. This made my general reading very simple and enjoyable but I was still unhappy with the inertia in my putting this vocabulary into action. It would take far more effort and patience, I realized, to move its state from passive to active, where *proficiency* instead of *skill*, *subtle nuances* instead of *fine differences*, and *exhort* instead of *strongly urge* would at least **dribble**,[2] if not smoothly flow, out of my mouth.

[1] A **wheeler dealer** is someone who advances his or her own interests by canny, aggressive or unscrupulous behaviour: *the wheeler dealer types will not spare even the ignorant poor from their dubious schemes*. However, please note that this chapter is not about such unscrupulous people and you will discover the actual subject as you read further!

[2] **Dribble** means a small trickling stream or a drop or a small quantity of anything: *a dribble of revenue*. As a verb, this word means to fall or flow in drops or small quantities; trickle: *the honey dribbled out of the cracked bottle*. In the world of sports, *dribble* means to advance a

Soon I got busy preparing my **curriculum vitae**[3] (CV) to apply for jobs being offered on campus. At this stage, the differentiation between competing candidates was apparent. Suddenly, I was left wondering why, in the single-minded pursuit of academics and language skills, I had ignored to hone the moderate skills in sports and dramatics *(limited to Hindi language)* that I had acquired in school. Mentioning *'I organized several blood donation camps in college'* when I was merely a donor or that *'I am an active member of the photography club'* when I had never handled an **SLR camera**[4] or seen the inside of a dark room, seemed too **trite**[5] and too risky.

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ball by bouncing it (especially in basketball) or advance a ball or a puck by giving it a series of short kicks or pushes (especially in ice hockey and soccer). Dribble sometimes gets confused with **drizzle** (light rain). In fact, Scots frequently use the two words interchangeably to denote a light shower of rain.

[3] **Curriculum vitae** (CV) is a brief biographical résumé of a person's education, training, and career, as prepared by a person applying for a job. Etymologically, in Latin it means the 'course' of one's 'life'. Incidentally, most people pronounce this term incorrectly and may fail to tell its plural correctly (curricula vitae). I inferred that since CV is a brief résumé, a résumé should capture the person's educational and professional history quite comprehensively. I was surprised to discover that a résumé is also brief written account of personal, educational, and professional qualifications and experience, as prepared by an applicant for a job. The only difference seemed to be the inclusion of a personal account in a résumé, something missing in a CV. *Résumé* is a French word derived from the noun use of past participle of *résumer*—'to resume, sum up' and hence means a summing up or a summary.

[4] **SLR camera** is a photography term and is an abbreviation of 'single-lens reflex' camera.

[5] **Trite** means lacking in freshness or effectiveness because of constant use or excessive repetition; hackneyed; stale: *the dialogue in this movie is quite trite, and some of the performances leave a lot to be desired.*

My friend Rahul, however, seemed quite relaxed during this entire process. I had not noticed him **flexing**[6] his muscles in any sporting or speaking events or taking a role of leadership during the nearly four years of our close association. (Incidentally, the tongue is a muscle, if you are wondering whether I used the term figuratively.) More out of brotherly concern for him, I asked if he had any idea on what to write under the sections on 'extracurricular achievements' and 'positions of leadership'.

He confided that while it was too late to do anything about the latter topic, he had cracked the former quite smartly. He would mention his extracurricular interests as *cosmology, rugby, yachting* and *Israel*. 'Have you lost it?' I exclaimed in disbelief. He calmed me down and we agreed that *cosmology, rugby* and *yachting* indeed looked impressive on a CV and there was very little chance that any of the interviewers would have more knowledge in these areas than Rahul could acquire in a few weeks of intense preparation.

That still left *Israel*, which as far as I had heard, read, or remembered, was not a term used other than as a proper noun for a country's name. I was right but Rahul's plan was to read a newly released book on *Israel* and portray that, despite lack of financial resources to visit the country of his dreams, it was his passion to track *Israel* as a nation and all its uniqueness **steeped**[7] in history.

[6] **Flex** means to bend, as a part of the body, including moving a joint so that the parts it connects approach each other: *he flexed his arms to show off his muscles*. It also means to tighten a muscle by contraction. It is probably a back formation from *flexibility*.

[7] **Steep** means (1) to soak in water or other liquid, as to soften, cleanse, or extract some constituent, essence, or property: *to steep tea leaves in boiling hot water*; (2) to wet thoroughly in or with a liquid;

This inspired me immensely. Now, instead of mentioning 'English trivia' as an engaging pastime, I contemplated **jazzing**[8] it up as 'vagaries and idiosyncrasies of English language'. I dropped 'stamp collection' (philately) and 'coin collection' (numismatics) from my CV, borrowed 'cosmology' from Rahul and added 'creative writing' to infuse an intellectual edge and respectability to my list of skills. Incidentally, my only claim to creative writing was a couple of prizes in essay writing competitions in school and a second prize for an article in the college magazine some years earlier.

Armed with my **arsenal**[9] of newly found skills and creativity, I confidently strode (note, didn't walk) into the room where a panel waited to dissect my personality, professional skills, and

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drench; saturate; and (3) to saturate with or immerse in or subject thoroughly to some strong or pervading influence: *practices steeped in tradition*.

[8] **Jazz**: I am sure you are familiar with jazz as a musical style that originated at the beginning of the 20th century in African-American communities in southern US (New Orleans). Jazz as a slang means (1) insincere, exaggerated, or pretentious talk: *don't give me any of that jazz about your great job*; and (2) similar or related but unspecified things, activities, etc.: *he goes for paragliding and all that jazz*. The phrasal verb **jazz up** means (1) to add liveliness, vigour, or excitement to; to act or proceed with great energy or liveliness and (2) to add ornamentation, colour, or extra features to, to increase appeal or interest; embellish.

[9] **Arsenal** means (1) a place of storage or a magazine containing arms and military equipment for land or naval service; (2) a government establishment where military equipment or munitions are manufactured; and (3) a collection or supply of weapons, munitions, or anything else: *he came to the meeting with an impressive arsenal of new research data*.

the amazing array of my spectacular skills and achievements. After what seemed (to me) like an outstanding performance in the technical round, I was confidently waiting to floor the panel with my non-technical pursuits. One of the panellists, who hadn't spoken too much during the technical session, suddenly **perked**[10] up and wanted to understand the difference between an 'idiosyncrasy' and a 'vagary'. He also asked for an example of each.

Till this question was fired, I had never ever bothered to delve so deeply into the 'titles' of my hobbies. I rapidly **rummaged**[11] through my memory bank and just before the pause to **ponder**[12] became professionally unacceptable, I

[10] **Perk** means (1) to become lively, cheerful, or vigorous, as after depression or sickness (usually followed by 'up'): *the patients perked up when we played the piano for them*; *you're exhausted, but a cup of tea will perk you up*; (2) to act, or carry oneself, in a **jaunty** *(having a buoyant or self-confident air; brisk; crisp and dapper in appearance; natty)* manner; (3) to make smart, trim, or jaunty (sometimes followed by 'up' or 'out'): *he perked up his dull suit with a colourful tie*; (4) to raise smartly or briskly: *the dog's ears perked up at the sight of James returning from office.* As slang, *perk* means an extra financial benefit; a monetary reward. The slang word is derived from *perquisite*: *the government job doesn't pay me much, but the perks are good.*

[11] **Rummage** means (1) to search thoroughly or actively through (a place, **receptacle** [container, vessel, etc.]), but unsystematically and untidily, especially by turning over, or disarranging the contents: *the desperate smoker was rummaging through rubbish looking for a discarded lighter;* (2) to find, bring, or fetch by searching (often followed by 'out' or 'up'): *I rummaged out a classic from the pile of used books at a street-seller*; (3) to search actively within oneself: *she rummaged in her mind for the forgotten name.*

[12] **Ponder** is to consider something deeply and thoroughly; meditate (often followed by over or upon); to weigh carefully in the mind; consider thoughtfully: *he pondered over his next words thoroughly.*

recollected reading the word 'idiosyncrasy' with regard to unusual behaviour, mannerism or reaction of a person or group (*idiosyncrasies of the movie star*) and 'vagary' with regard to an unpredictable or erratic action or occurrence (*the vagaries of weather*). Sharply regaining my confident tone, I articulated the subtle difference and gave a few examples too.

I now had an offer letter from one of the largest engineering companies in India giving me a princely salary of 5633 rupees per month, which by the way was the highest salary offered on our campus in 1992. The company also offered to sponsor my journey from Rohtak to Jamshedpur (also known as Tata Nagar) in an AC two-tier train coach to join my first job as a mechanical engineer.

I am sure the full **import**[13] of the title of this chapter has finally dawned upon you. But, there is a small twist in the tale. This chapter doesn't just deal in anecdotes of *wheeler dealers* who use unscrupulous means to advance their interests; it also *deals* with *wheels* and other modes of mobility. Let us start with the one that quickly replaced the train journeys in my life once I joined as a Graduate Engineer Trainee at Tata Nagar.

My marital status had not changed since I had ticked 'single' in the job application form. Hence, I was offered, like all others, a single room in what was known as B.E. (Bachelor Engineers) Hostel. This room was much more

[13] **Import** is a popular word in the word of commerce (importing good and/or services) and computer science (to bring documents, data, etc. into one software programme from another). It also means to be of consequence or importance: *a legal decision of far-reaching import; these are matters of great import*. Import is also used to convey meaning, implication, or significance of something: *her words imported a change of attitude; he felt the import of her words*.

spacious than the room sizes we had accustomed ourselves to in the preceding four years and also had a bathroom **en suite.**[14] The factory was a five-minute drive away (on my bike), and our working hours were 7 a.m. till 4 p.m. with a five minute grace at both ends. This presented an opportunity to shave off an extra ten minutes, and we soon perfected the art of punching in our entry in the last ten seconds (between 7.04.50 a.m. and 7.05.00 a.m.) and punching out our exit in the first ten seconds (3.55.00 p.m. and 3.55.10 p.m.).

The time thus saved and the rest of the day was spent in forging new personal ties, contemplating what 'next' in life, and maintaining the obsession of reading books and magazines by renting them from the company library.

One of those days, while reading a magazine, my eyes fell on an incredibly beautiful girl dressed as a ballerina in a **tutu.**[15] She was delicately but confidently balanced on her toes, looking expectantly towards the west. I was **mesmerized**[16] by her beauty and poise. Sometime later, when my **trance**[17] was broken by the shrill bell declaring that dinner

[14] **En suite** means as part of a set; forming a unit: *a hotel room with bathroom en suite*. This is a French word that literally means 'as part of a series or set'; 'in sequence'.

[15] **Tutu** is a short, full skirt, usually made of several layers of **tarlatan** or **tulle**, worn by ballerinas. **Tarlatan** is a thin, plain-weave, open-mesh cotton fabric finished with stiffening agents and sometimes glazed. **Tulle** is a thin, fine, machine-made net of acetate, nylon, rayon, or silk.

[16] **Mesmerize** means to hypnotize, to spellbind, to enthral, to fascinate, etc.: *I have never been a fan of period films or Jane Austen, but I was absolutely mesmerized by each frame of the adaptations of her novels* Pride and Prejudice *and* Sense and Sensibility.

[17] **Trance** means (1) a semi-conscious state, a between sleeping and waking, in which ability to function voluntarily may be suspended and there is lack of sensitivity to external stimuli; a dazed or stunned

was served in the hostel mess, I looked more carefully and realized that she was modelling for Cathay Pacific Airlines. The following words in the advertisement finally caught my attention: *Cathay Pacific. The Airline for a world where Pirouettes take an Oriental turn.*

I was **nonplussed**[18] as I couldn't understand the advertisement. Look at the **inanities**[19] of the team that handles marketing at Cathay Pacific, I thought. The international traveller would not understand the **obscure**[20] terminology of the ad, let alone get attracted and then patronize the airline! So I hastily concluded that the airline was destined for bankruptcy.

Here, I collected my thoughts, paused to ponder for a while and realized that I was not an international traveller. Besides I had recently read that Cathay Pacific was one of the world's most popular airlines. I concluded, much to my dismay, that the international traveller indeed understood

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condition; (2) a state of such intense ecstasy or mystic absorption that it causes a temporary loss of consciousness at the earthly level; a hypnotic state; a state of deep musing: *the entire audience was in an ecstatic trance induced solely by your powerful speech*; and (3) a type of electronic dance music with repetitive rhythms, aiming at a hypnotic effect.

[18] **Nonplussed** means completely puzzled, utterly perplexed: *he was nonplussed by the sudden outburst of his team member.*

[19] **Inanity** means lack of sense, significance, or ideas; also silliness, shallowness, or superficiality: *the news of his inanities had travelled to his new department, even before he joined it.*

[20] **Obscure** means (1) not clear or plain, ambiguous, vague, uncertain, or hard to perceive: *an obscure sentence in the contract*; (2) inconspicuous or unnoticeable: *obscure beginnings of a great movement*; (3) of little or no prominence, note, fame, or distinction: *an obscure French artist*; and (4) far from public notice, worldly affairs, or important activities; remote; retired: *an obscure little town.*

the advertisement and, if it earned his appreciation, it may influence his choice of international airline.

Dejectedly, I looked up *Oxford Advanced Learner's* and learnt that **pirouette** is a rapid turn or spin made while balanced on the points of the toes, as in ballet dancing. And thanks to a preponderance of Chinese restaurants marketing themselves as specialists in Oriental cuisine (some even with names like Oriental Bowl), I had concluded that Oriental was something to do with China. Hence I also concluded that Cathay Pacific was the airline of China. Nonetheless, I checked and, to my surprise, discovered that **Oriental** is not limited to China alone. It denotes something or somebody from the countries of the Far East, like Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, etc. The dictionary also explained that the opposite of Oriental was **Occidental**, meaning far west.

Not to take further chances, I checked for Cathay and found out that while **Cathay**[21] was the old name for China in English, Cathay Pacific is actually the airline of Hong Kong (which originally was a part of China, then was controlled by the British and is now back into the Chinese fold).

When I recently looked back at the same advertisement, I realized that the ad copy was more worded than I remembered it. There were other words like 'enthral' and 'enchantment', which I had then overlooked (despite not knowing them well enough) under the ballerina's dazzling spell.

However, as if lady luck had smiled on me that day, within a few months of joining as a Graduate Engineer Trainee,

[21] Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller, introduced the word 'Cathay' to Europe. The word is a corruption of *khitai* derived from *khitan*, the earliest of the northern races known to have conquered China. They disappeared at the start of the twelfth century.

I too graduated into the league of international travellers (but without the confidence of fully comprehending another similar advertisement, if I encountered one again). I was asked to travel to the neighbouring country of Sri Lanka. I flew Air Lanka,[22] and in between exchanging **endearing**[23] smiles with the air hostesses, I noticed that their in-flight magazine was *Serendib*.

This word sounded similar to the English word **serendipity** that relates to the discovery of treasures by accident. That got me interested to dig a little deeper into this mystery. I was in for a pleasant surprise when I found out that the English word *serendipity* owes its origin to an old name of Sri Lanka! After the discovery of gold in this island country, it became known as Swaran Dweep, Sanskrit for 'island of gold'. With passage of time, Swaran Dweep got modified to Serendip.

Serendipity was adopted as a word in English after its use by British author Horace Walpole as part of the title of a fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*. As the three heroes travelled, they made discoveries, by accidents and **sagacity**,[24] of things they were not looking for.

If random encounters with the airline industry were so enriching, I wondered if a little research into airplanes and other modes of mobility would open another interesting

[22] In 1998, the Air Lanka brand was abandoned, and SriLankan Airlines was born.

[23] **Endearing** means tending to make dear or beloved; manifesting or evoking affection: *the child's endearing smile made me hug and kiss her.*

[24] **Sagacity** is the quality of being wise, level-headed, discerning, sound in judgement, and far-sighted: *she displayed great sagacity by refusing to get in the taxi as soon as she sensed that the driver was a little drunk.*

avenue for me to learn English words. Before I start to impress you with my findings, let me confess that I did not know till very recently that airplanes do not have a reverse gear! For that matter, they do not even have forward gears.

However, while this does not come in the way of propelling them forward, they simply cannot **reverse**[25] themselves and need the services of special vehicles (called tugs or pushback tractors) to 'push' their front wheels 'back' from the terminal gate. This is the origin of the word **pushback**, now synonymous with setting the aircraft wheels into motion and taking it a safe distance away from the terminal gate before its engines are turned on. The plane then takes control of its motion and steering and proceeds to take off.

Until I discovered this, I always wondered why pilots announced that they expected to commence pushback in another minute or two. It is interesting to note that during pushback, since the pilots cannot see what is behind the aircraft, steering is done by the pushback tractor driver, not the pilots. Another interesting fact is that till 1936, all the planes had to be started by swinging the propeller by hand! In 1936, US Waco single engine aircraft of 225 bhp arrived with a self-starter.

Did you know that, till the early 1930s, most pilots landed their crafts in fields? Some had a companion, others a mechanic. Most of them had very little money and could not afford the luxury of a small hotel in nearby villages or

[25] Although several aircraft can also move backwards on the ground using reverse thrust (powerback), the resulting jet blast or propeller wash may cause damage to the terminal building or equipment. Engines close to the ground may also blow sand and debris forward and then suck it in to the engine, damaging it. A pushback using a tractor is therefore the preferred method to move the aircraft away from the gate.

towns. So, under the pretext that it was necessary to be near the plane, the pilot and his companion would **induce**[26] the **overwrought**[27] farmer to use his barn as a means of shelter. This is the origin of the term **barnstorming,**[28] which means to travel around the countryside making theatrical performances, appearing in exhibition sport events, making speeches, or giving lectures.

You may also be amused to know that the Boeing 747 is referred to in the industry as 'The Saviour'. Boeing made it in 1967, and the reason for this association was that when the visitors entered the enormous **mock-up**[29] cabin, their automatic reaction was to say 'Christ'! When Boeing first announced plans for the 747 Jumbo Jet in 1966, it seemed almost too big to fly. Sceptics predicted **catastrophic**[30] crashes, crumpled runways, and **gridlocked**[31] passenger terminals. But

[26] **Induce** means to persuade, influence, or tempt to bring about, produce or cause some action or a change in the state of mind: *to induce a person to buy a lottery ticket* or *to give a medicine to induce sleep*.

[27] **Overwrought** means excessively nervous or excited, deeply agitated, or distraught with grief, etc.: *Jack was overwrought by grief*. It looks like *overwrought* is another example of a contronym!

[28] R.M. Lala, *Beyond the Last Blue Mountain: The Authorised Biography of J.R.D. Tata* (Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1992)

[29] **Mock-up** is a usually full-sized scale model of a structure, used for teaching, demonstration, promotion, design evaluation, testing, or study: *the horse chase scene was filmed in a jungle, with the benefit of having real woods, instead of a studio mock-up*.

[30] **Catastrophic** means a sudden and widespread disaster; any failure or mishap: *a small oversight by the aircraft engineer can have catastrophic consequences*.

[31] **Gridlock** is the stoppage of free vehicular movement due to blockage of intersections by heavy traffic: *I missed my flight due to a traffic gridlock on the way*.

the 747 has become the most famous and successful airliner of all time, a revolutionary aircraft that reigned unchallenged for thirty-five years and earned Boeing an estimated 100 billion dollars. That's almost certainly the largest figure for any single industrial product in history. Boeing 747s have flown over 3.5 billion passengers. That's more than half the world's population![32]

Let's move from flying machines to cars and explore interesting elements from the history of the evolution of automobiles. Between Britain's Locomotives on Highways Act of 1865 (better known as the Red Flag Act) and a modern car, only one could have survived. Thankfully, the modern car survived and the Act was disbanded, for the Act only permitted a maximum speed of 6.4 kph in open country and 3.2 kph in towns for all mechanically powered road vehicles!

The Act did not limit itself to prescribing a maximum speed. To safeguard pedestrians from the heavy steam of cars (since they were powered by steam engines) and warn horse-driven coaches, it required that every vehicle be manned by at least three people: one to steer, one to **stoke**,[33] and one to walk sixty yards ahead of the car, waving a red flag to warn pedestrians. A subsequent Act, passed thirteen years later in 1878, did away with the red flag, but the vehicle still had to be preceded by a man on foot. In 1896, the Act was withdrawn, and the speed limit increased to 22 kph.

Incidentally, did you know that gunpowder was once considered as a fuel for internal combustion engines?

[32] http://www.infoplease.com/spot/boeing747.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

[33] **Stoke** means to poke, stir up, and feed a fire (especially a furnace that is used with a boiler to generate steam for an engine).

Moving on from what seems like remote history to more recent times and to the term coined in the twentieth century: a **Friday car**—a new car that rolls out of the assembly line on a Friday and, apparently, has more manufacturing defects than cars rolled out on any other day of the week. Within cars made on a Friday, the ones that suffer most are those manufactured in the afternoon, as it is then that worker concentration touches its lowest level.

Trouble erupted since US companies shifted to a five-day week. It has been seen that worker performance opens up moderately on Mondays, peaks around Wednesdays, and deteriorates considerably by Friday afternoon. In some places, workers are now **clamouring**[34] for a four-day week. If that gets under way, we may soon have a Thursday car instead.☺

Let us now unravel the anatomy of a car and see if there are some interesting learnings for us. You may be conversant with a **bonnet**, which is the hinged cover over the engine of a car, and the **dicky**, that cabin in the rear to hold the luggage and, in housefull conditions, to seat the kids. Did you know that dicky is a corruption of the antiquated *dicky*, which originally meant a small extra folding seat at the back of some old-fashioned two-seater cars? Americans call the dicky a **trunk** while the British call it a **boot**.

There are metal or plastic frames in the front and the rear of a vehicle to absorb any mild shock, and to prevent damage to the vehicle resulting from accidental contact or collision. They also prevent splashing water or mud, sand and small stones and any other road spray from being thrown into the air by the rotating tyre and risk hitting other vehicles

[34] **Clamour** is a loud uproar, as from a crowd of people.

or pedestrians. Each is called a **fender**, which is a shortened form of *defender* (*de*—'from, away' and '*fendere*'—'to strike, push'). Hence, etymologically, it is an apparatus to defend the vehicle against any damage.

Striking off 'er' from defender and fender give us the words defend and fend, and both come from the same root *fendere*. While the word defend is very common, I wanted to spend a minute on the word fend. Fend means to ward off (*fend off a blow*) and also to make an effort to resist (*fend against the extreme cold*). Fend also means to attempt to manage with external help or assistance: *we had to fend for ourselves until we were rescued.*

But if the fender doesn't come to the rescue, most cars find their way to a service station where they are jacked up for inspection and repairs. I wonder if jack and hijack are related! Let us investigate. Jack, besides being used in industries and automobile service centres to raise the elevation of the job material, is also used by car owners to elevate and *hold up* the weight of the vehicle when raised to change punctured, deflated, or burst tyres. This leads us to a **jacker**, the one who *holds up* (or even robs). **Hijack** is merely a combination of high(way) and jack(er) and means to seize, divert or appropriate (a vehicle or the goods it carries) while in transit. Hijack may have started its journey with vehicles that ply on roads but, since the 1970s, has extended its role to any form of transportation. Of course, now we even have *carjack* and *skyjack*.

In the excitement of this revelation, I set out to explore if there could be any link between the word *puncture* and similar sounding words like *punctual*, *punctilious*, and *punctuate*. They looked too far removed in meaning from each other to have originated from a common source. But

what the heck, I thought, let me check. What I discovered was quite fascinating—these **disparate**[35] words indeed developed from a common root!

Puncture comes from Latin *pungere*[36]—'pierce or prick with a point', and it means to deflate by piercing with a pointed object. One could even puncture or deflate someone's ego through one's action or behaviour. A **punctual** person is right on the 'point' of pre-agreed time. A person who is **punctilious** is scrupulous, meticulous, conscientious and thorough, and hence **assimilates**[37] all the 'points' of a good behaviour. When someone has **compunction** for something they have done, they are ridden with guilt and regret for their act, their conscience literally 'pricks' them (Latin *compunctus*; *com*—'with' and *pungere*). I visualized the day when my own conscience pricked me as soon as I lost my temper at a child, and this helped fix this root into my head.

We finally come to the word *punctuate*, which gave me maximum grief while writing this book. **Punctuate** is to

[35] **Disparate** means dissimilar, unrelated, or contrasting: *the movie started off with several seemingly disparate themes, but they converged beautifully towards the end.*

[36] The Latin root *pungere* is also the source of the word pungent. **Pungent** is something that sharply affects the organs of taste or smell, as if by a penetrating power, something biting or acrid: *due to the pungent odour of the chemical, the classroom was cleared.* In a literary sense, it means a speech or a statement that is biting or sharply expressive: *your pungent remarks on corruption in the government made many enemies today.*

[37] **Assimilate** means to absorb something and make it one's own: *I assimilated many new experiences during my cultural trip to Europe.* It also means to adapt or adjust to the customs or attitudes of a group or a nation: *the immigrants were willing to assimilate the culture, traditions and practices of their adopted land.*

mark or divide (something written) with punctuation marks to make the meaning clear. It also means to interrupt at intervals: *cheers punctuated the mayor's speech*. I had a hard time deciding between using a comma (,) and a semi-colon (;) and an even harder time figuring out whether to use an em dash (—), an en dash (–) or a colon (:). The other significant challenge was to resolve the gap between the concepts our English teacher drilled into our heads at school and the mixed signals I received through the usage practices of the current crop of writers.

I had grown up believing that starting a sentence with 'and' was nothing short of a serious crime and, of course, commas were never to be used before the seven coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet). These days, **puritans**[38] have grudgingly accepted sentences that commence with 'and' as well as the authors who construct them. And there are new rules for placing commas before coordinating conjunctions.

A comma is used to separate two 'independent' clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction—*I have vacuumed the entire house, but he is still busy cleaning the cars*. Use of a comma is optional if the clauses are not long or complex—*I shop and he settles the bill*. But punctuation has never been an exact science and even if there are rules, they are either too many or too complex. Oscar Wilde famously said: 'I spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out.'

After punctuating our discussion on automobiles, it is time to head back. I am reminded of 1984 when a new car called

[38] **Puritan** is a person who is strict in moral or religious matters, often excessively so: *his puritanical standards often came in the way of having a light-hearted conversation in college.*

Omni was introduced in the Indian market from the Maruti Suzuki stable. The name was familiar . . . A little brain tickling and I recollected that the word omni was used in a prayer we used to say in school, **extolling**[39] the virtues of god: *Praise god who is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient.*

And when I checked in the dictionary and discovered that omni means all or everywhere, all these virtues started making sense to me. **Omnipresent** is to be present everywhere. **Omnipotent** is to have unlimited or very great power (Latin *potentem*—'to have power', as also used in words potential, potency, etc.) **Omniscient** is all knowing (Greek *sciencs*—'to know'). The root *sciencs* got me two more words. **Prescience** is to know beforehand, to have foresight (*pre*—'before'): *in retrospect, it seems that George had prescience about the fuels of the future and hence invested considerably into research on bio-fuels and solar energy*. **Nescience** is to be lacking in knowledge; ignorant (*ne*—'not'): *due to my nescience in tax matters, I had to depend on a tax consultant to file my income tax returns*.

Omni was not to leave me very quickly as the dictionary had a few more words with the same prefix. **Omnific** means to have unlimited powers of creation, symbolizing god: *the sustained bull-run in the stock market looked omnificent in creating and spreading wealth amongst retail investors.* **Omnibus** used to be a large road vehicle that carried a considerable number of passengers. This is what has been shortened to its modern avatar—a bus. Omnibus also meant and still means a large volume containing many books or stories by the same author.

[39] **Extol** is to praise highly, laud, eulogize: *to extol the beauty of Naples*.

We talked about automobiles but disregarded the tracks on which they drive—roads. Most roads are conventional but have you ever heard of **corduroy roads**? These are impassable mud or dirt roads that are improved by placing sand-covered logs perpendicular to the direction of the road. They are probably called so because they resemble corduroy, the fabric made of twisted fibres that, when woven, lie parallel to one another to form the cloth's distinct ridged pattern.

Turnpikes are high-speed highways with regulated entries usually after paying toll tax. Formerly, turnpike was also a name given to the barriers that prevent vehicular movement without toll-tax payment, a tollgate. **Cul-de-sac** is a road that is closed at one end. But what is important to note is that it has adequate provision for turning a vehicle. There are a few cul-de-sacs that are not only closed at one end but also do not have any provision for turning. True to what they create, these roads are called **dead-ends**. You would agree that without proper prior warnings, cul-de-sacs and dead-ends could cause a lot of inconvenience to the drivers. And, on conventional roads, this role of inconveniencing others is taken over by a **road hog,** a reckless and inconsiderate driver who monopolizes the road by driving very slowly in the middle.

Did you know that there are no roads in the city of London? Unlike Venice, where most intra-city connectors are waterways, every road turns into a *street* when it reaches London. Talking of roads, I recall an interesting letter from a reader in a magazine:

'My husband is in the air force and we were recently stationed in Japan. In the first few weeks, we were busy adjusting to the new customs and culture. We were amazed to see the friendliness of Japanese children. Whenever we drove

through town, the children would stand on the side of the road, waving at us. I would give them a big smile and wave back. Weeks later, I learnt that in Japan, children wave their hands to stop traffic so that they can cross the road!'

Let's move over from the road to the railroad. I read with interest that the earliest railroads (in the mid-16th century) were made of wooden poles, and railways were used exclusively to transport ores from mines. The replacement of wooden poles by cast-iron rails in the late 18th century and the development (by Richard Trevithick in 1804) of a locomotive capable of heavy **haulage**[40] (20 tonnes) prepared the railroad for uses other than mining. But it was not until 1825 that steam-powered freight and passenger service started on the Stockton and Darlington Railway in England.[41]☺

The railways contributed greatly to expanding the vocabulary of many languages. Here are some English words and phrases that owe their origin to this mode of transportation:

- all steamed up
- make the grade
- standard time
- **brownie points**[42]
- on track/sidetracked
- station wagon
- derail
- one-track mind
- timetable
- getting coupled
- run out of steam

[40] **Haulage** is the act or labour of hauling. Hauling is to pull or draw with force, to cart or transport. Haulage also refers to the charge made, especially by a railroad, for hauling material: *Man & Van Transport Co. offers light haulage and parcel delivery in our area.*

[41] http://www.infoplease.com/spot/trains-planes-autos.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[42] **Brownie points** is apparently derived from the name of a 19th century American railroad superintendent, George R. Brown who, in 1886, devised what was then an innovative system of merits and

I am sure you are familiar with all these words and phrases but let us see if you can completely comprehend a railroad joke that I recently came across:

> *Two drunks were walking up an incline between the railroad tracks. One said: 'This is the longest stairway I have ever been on.' The other said: 'It's not the stairs that bother me; it's the low* ***banister!***'[43]☺

demerits for railroad employees on the Fall Brook Railway in New York state. Accounts of his system were published in railroad journals, and adopted by many leading US railroads. American railroad employees soon began referring colloquially to 'brownie points' and, at some point, the term entered the general vocabulary. (Source: http://cprr.org/CPRR_Discussion_Group/2006/03/brownie points.html).

[43] http://www.michiganrailroads.com/RRHX/Stories/RailroadJokes.htm, last accessed on 12 September 2012

This joke may not deserve full-throated laughter but when I first heard it I couldn't even manage a smile, since I didn't know what a *banister* was. The only remotely similar thing I knew was a **canister** (can, container) or a **barrister** (a lawyer who can plead at the **bar**). When I checked, I found out that a **banister** is another name for a railing one usually finds on both sides of a staircase. Now, banister has been permanently banned from escaping my hippocampus (*seat of memory in the brain*).

Let me share another railroad joke that I read around the same time, and where my laughter was not **stifled**[44] by my poor vocabulary:

A man and a woman, who have never met before, find themselves assigned to the same sleeping room on a train. Although initially embarrassed and uneasy over sharing a room, the two are tired and fall asleep quickly, he in the upper bunk and she in the lower. At 2 a.m., he leans over and gently wakes the woman, saying: 'Ma'am, I'm sorry to bother you, but would you be willing to reach into the closet to get me a second blanket? I'm awfully cold.' 'I have a better idea,' she replies, 'just for tonight, let us pretend that we're married.' 'Wow! That's a great idea!' he exclaims. 'Good,' she replies, 'so get your own damn blanket!'[45]☺

Let me take you back to our earlier discussion on fenders. Do you know that even railway engines have fenders in the front? But, unlike in cars, where their purpose is to absorb

[44] **Stifled** means subdued, muted, or muffled: *his visionary voice was stifled by sorrow and grief.*

[45] http://www.michiganrailroads.com/RRHX/Stories/RailroadJokes.htm, last accessed on 12 September 2012

any mild shock and prevent damage to the engine and to block splashing water or mud, fenders in front of railway engines have a distinct purpose. Any guesses? These fenders are used to clear the tracks of any obstructions like logs of wood, pieces of rock, and animals that stray on to the railway line. Interestingly, fenders in railway engines are also called cowcatchers, apparently in **deference**[46] to the preponderance of stray cows that get caught in these fenders!

Allow me to now peep into the world of bicycles. Did you know that in one of the earliest cycles invented in Britain, the front wheel was four times larger than the rear wheel? It was named Penny Farthing, which sounds as odd as the cycle must have looked. There was indeed logic in naming this cycle and the concept was borrowed from money—a *farthing* was one-fourth the amount of a *penny*!

Bikes also gave me a new word 'ono', which I spotted in the following advertisement in a glossy foreign magazine: *Lady's bike for sale $25 ono*. This word struck me as a possible misprint. I thought the correct copy should have been: *Lady's bike for sale $25 only*. But never to take chances after so many ego-destabilizing experiences in the past, I consulted my favourite online dictionary, www.dictionary.com. I found out that **ono** is definitely not a misprint but an acronym for 'or nearest offer' and used in advertisements to convey downward flexibility in the quoted price. In the above advertisement, it suggests that the owner of the bike is likely to accept a price slightly lower than 25 dollars, if no offer for 25 dollars is received.

[46] **Deference** means respectful or courteous regard or submission to the opinion, wishes or judgement of another person: *he married early in deference to the wishes of his ageing parents*.

I am sure you know that the prefix 'bi' as in bicycle means 'two, double, twice'. But then why is it that when we say **biannual**, it means occurring twice a year and **bimonthly**, once every two months? Shouldn't bimonthly also mean occurring twice in a month? We'll have to forget this discrepancy as one of the idiosyncrasies of the English language. This 'bi' is not that confusing when it comes to other words it qualifies.

Bifurcate is to divide something into two equal or unequal parts. Similarly there is **trifurcation** where this division is into three parts. Logically, there should be words for division of something into four, five, or six parts as well, but for lack of application these expressions have not taken off. **Bipartite** is something that is divided into or consists of two parts, or is shared by two (Latin *partire*—'to part'): *a bipartite agreement or contract*. Incidentally, partition (a separation or division into parts) comes from the same Latin root *partire*. **Bipartisan** means consisting of or supported by members of two parties, especially two major political parties: *a bipartisan resolution to fight inflation*.

Bilingual is a person who can speak two languages with equal or nearly equal ease and fluency (Latin *lingua*—'tongue'). People have native proficiency in one language (mother tongue) and acquired proficiency in the other, and thus most of them shall not have equal but nearly equal fluency in the second language. Bilingual also means spoken, written, or containing similar information in two different languages: *a bilingual dictionary*, *a bilingual school*, or *bilingual public notices at the embassy*.

English even has the word **polylingual** for a person who has mastery over many languages (*poly*—'many'). Polylingual also has linguistic company in the word **polyglot** (Greek *glotta*—'tongue'). And finally from the prefix 'bi', we get the

bicameral system of government (Latin *camera*—'chamber') that has two chambers of legislative assembly. This system is quite popular globally and many countries (Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, US, etc. to name a few) follow it.

Now let us see if **shipping** can throw up some interesting words. The ***Titanic***[47] was one of the most famous ships and one of the largest ocean liners ever built, measuring 883 feet long, 92 feet wide, 104 feet high from keel to bridge, and weighing 46,328 tonnes.[48] The ship cost an unprecedented 7.5 million dollars—today, that would be 400 million dollars—and took three years to build. The story of the *Titanic* is well known but few people know what fate awaited its sister ship *HMHS Britannic*.

HMHS (His Majesty's Hospital Ship) Britannic, sister ship of the *Titanic*, was launched by White Star Lines on 26 February 1914. After the *Titanic* disaster in 1912, the plan for the slightly larger *Britannic* involved major upgrades to the safety systems. The *Britannic* was to be set for service between Southampton, England, and New York beginning in 1915. The outbreak of World War I changed things. On 13 November 1915, it was officially completed as a hospital ship and drafted for war duty. On its sixth voyage on 21 November 1916, it was in the Kea Channel in the Aegean Sea when a tremendous explosion ripped open its bow. It sank in just fifty-five minutes (the *Titanic* took approximately two hours and forty minutes) but only thirty of the 1100 on board

[47] **Titanic** means pertaining to or characteristic of the Titans. In Greek myth, the Titans were a race of powerful gods who ruled Earth until Zeus overthrew them. Hence, titanic refers to something or someone of enormous size, strength, or power.

[48] The model in James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster film *Titanic* was built 90 per cent to scale.

died. (In contrast, on the *Titanic*, only 705 of the 2,227 on board had survived.) Theories surrounding the cause of the mysterious explosion include hitting a mine, a torpedo impact or an explosion from within resulting from ignition of coal dust in the reserve **bunker**.[49]

Keel and *bow*, that I have underlined above, were words I did not fully comprehend, and a little research dug out a few more terms specific to the shipping industry. **Keel** is the name given to the bottom of the hull. But what's a hull? **Hull** refers to the body of a ship or a boat. The frontmost part of the hull is called **bow** while the rearmost part is called **stern.**

I would not have remembered these distinctions without a mnemonic, so this is what I made. When the Japanese greet their guests, they bow (pronounced 'bou') down in front. So bow (pronounced 'boh') on the ship is right in the front. I remembered 'keel' from 'heel', as heels are worn on feet, which are at the 'bottom' of our body. Stern was a slight challenge. You need to recollect a very **stern** (strict, harsh) teacher from your school days and the mad **scramble**[50] for the benches at the 'back' during his classes. And in schools where corporal punishment was allowed, there were whacks

[49] http://www.infoplease.com/spot/britannic1.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[50] **Scramble** means (1) to compete or struggle with others to get something: *the children scrambled for the coins we tossed*; (2) to climb or move quickly using one's hands and feet, as down a rough incline; and (3) to collect or organize (things) in a hurried or disorderly manner (often followed by 'together' or 'up'): *he scrambled the papers up from the desk; I scrambled together a report at the last minute*. To scramble is also to cook eggs in a pan while stirring, usually after mixing whites and yolks together. It also means to make (a radio or telephonic message) incomprehensible to interceptors by altering the transmission frequencies.

by a stern teacher on your 'back' for going off-track. Hence, stern is the 'rear' most part of the hull.

There is a term called **draught** (or **draft** in American spelling) of a ship's hull, which means the depth to which a vessel is immersed when bearing a given load. In technical terms, we can say that it is the vertical distance between the waterline and the keel. Draught helps to determine the minimum depth of water in a river, canal, or at a port, that a ship or a boat can safely navigate. It is also used to calculate the weight of cargo on board by noting the total displacement of water and then applying the Archimedes' principle.

We shall discuss this term further (in the chapter titled 'Tummy Tuck') in connection with a type of beer called draught beer. This variety of beer helped me to form a passable memory aid for the *draught* of a ship's hull. Beer would obviously qualify as a *fluid* and the draught of the ship's hull is its vertical distance that is immersed in sea water (also a *fluid*). So, whenever I encounter the mention of draught in connection with shipping, I recollect a draught beer—and how the former is vertical distance of the ship's hull that is immersed in the water (a fluid) and the latter, a fluid that a ship's captain has immersed himself into.

Did you know that the word **posh** originated apparently due to the preference of European travellers to keep away from the sun during their travels towards the east? Thus, they took the left side of the ship during eastward journey and the right side when returning home, and were able to avoid facing strong rays of the sun throughout the entire journey. The left side of the ship (when facing the bow) is also called the **port** side while the right side is called the **starboard** side and hence comes the expansion of the acronym POSH—Port Out, Starboard Home.

Most etymologists, however, believe that posh actually originated from the British **slang**[51] word posh (meaning dandy) and that the acronym POSH is a later association. I don't mind this later association since it is an interesting way of learning the words *port* and *starboard*. Let's spend a minute on the equally interesting origins of these terms. The origin of the term starboard comes from early boating practices. Before ships had rudders on their centrelines, they were steered by use of a specialized steering oar. This oar was held by an oarsman located in the stern (back) of the ship and was affixed to the right side of the ship, as there were many more right-handed sailors than left-handed sailors. Hence, Old Norse *stýri*—'rudder' and *borð*—'side of a ship' combined to give us starboard. Port is simply derived from the practice of sailors mooring ships on the left side at ports to prevent the steering oar from being crushed.

Before we conclude, let me share another hilarious experience with the airline that had originally **piqued**[52] my curiosity to commence my research for this chapter—Cathay Pacific. The experience was hilarious but only for the

[51] **Slang** is informal word usage that is more, playful, humorous, ephemeral and deliberately used in place of standard terms for added raciness, humour, irreverence, or other effect. Interestingly, English is perhaps the only language that has 'slang' on par with 'formal' language. In fact there are certain words have a 'regular' meaning and a 'slang' meaning, both being different. Case in point: 'freak' is a person who is abnormal, while the slang 'to freak out' is to completely lose control by reason of fear, surprise, etc.

[52] **Pique** means to excite (interest, curiosity, etc.): *Sudoku puzzles have piqued the curiosity of people worldwide*. It also means to cause sharp irritation, resentment, and indignation, especially by some wound to pride: *she was greatly piqued when he refused to attend her first public performance*.

airhostess. For me, it was acutely embarrassing. It all started when I ordered my first complimentary wine on my second ever international flight from Tata Nagar to Taipei (with a change from railways to airways at Kolkata and a change of plane at Mumbai).

Back then (in 1993), India was dotted with 'wine shops' that surprisingly didn't sell any or probably very little wine. The masses believed (they still do) that wine was a generic term to describe popular drinks like whisky, beer and rum. I had lifted myself up from this mass generalization but, having inherited the common Indian **palate,**[53] had never tasted wine before this amazing opportunity of international travel came my way so early in my first job. The first one, as you would recollect, was spent in exchanging endearing smiles with the air hostesses of **Air Lanka.**[54]

Well-heeled[55] and hence well-travelled friends had briefed me well ahead of this scheduled trip that hard drinks are complimentary on international flights, and that I should not

[53] **Palate** refers to the sense of taste: *a dinner to delight the palate.* In anatomy, it refers to the roof of the mouth, consisting of an anterior bony portion (hard palate) and a posterior muscular portion (soft palate) that separate the oral cavity from the nasal cavity.

[54] In 1998, the Air Lanka brand was abandoned, and SriLankan Airlines was born.

[55] **Well-heeled** means well-off, rich, prosperous, wealthy, etc. I assume that this term was formed as only the rich families could afford shoes with heels in olden times. Heels help form several popular idioms and I am tempted to describe a few: (1) at one's heels (closely behind one): *the police are at his heels*; (2) cool one's heels (to be kept waiting, especially with deliberate discourtesy): *the producer let the actors who were waiting to be auditioned cool their heels in the outer office*; and (3) kick up one's heels (to have a really entertaining time): *grandfather could still kick up his heels now and then.*

hesitate to ask for as many refills as I needed. Of course, I flew Cathay Pacific, the airline for a world where pirouettes take an Oriental turn. As the airhostess on the Mumbai–Taipei leg rolled the drinks trolley close to my row, I began to wave my hands excitedly to draw her attention. It was as if I were bound by a subconscious fear that hard drinks, or at least the exotic variety, would run out before she managed to reach my seat.

Years of experience of international flying must have **imbued**[56] in her an ability to accurately predict if someone is a first- or second-time traveller, and who is also about to break the promise made to his mom (of never ever exceeding in a day, a glass of beer or a small peg of anything harder) and launch himself into a drinking binge. As if trying to help me keep my promise, she started off by asking if I would prefer orange or apple juice, Coke or Pepsi. I was in no mood to get tempted by such softies and asked her to give me options in hard drinks. She rattled off the names of some whiskys, beers, vodkas and rums but my heart was fixed on trying the elusive wines. So I dismissed her list and asked for options in expensive wines.

The names of wines that she offered were not only complex to **fathom**[57] (let alone remember) but left me perplexed on how to decide and, more important, how to

[56] **Imbue** means to instil or inspire: *she was imbued with the spirit of excellence in her role as a life coach.*

[57] **Fathom** is a unit of length equal to six feet (1.83 meters), used to measure marine depths. Fathom, as a verb means (1) to measure the depth of by means of a sounding line; sound and (2) to penetrate to the meaning, truth, or nature of; to comprehend, understand, grasp, etc.: *to fathom someone's motives.*

order! By the grace of god, I quickly recollected that a little while ago, she had mentioned a red and white wine to a fellow traveller seated a few rows ahead of me. So, with colour returning to my face and confidence to my voice, I ordered a 'Red & White' wine. At first, I thought she had not heard me properly, as she did not immediately process my order. But why did her face carry a **bemused**[58] (with a dash of 'shocked') look? Surely, this was not the first time in her long international flying career that someone had ordered a 'Red & White' wine?

Finally, after she had inhaled and exhaled deeply a few times, but with the bemused/shocked expression still on her face, she inquired if I wanted one glass of 'white' AND one glass of 'red' wine! Colour disappeared from my face again as I realized my folly—the popular 'Red & White' brand of cigarettes had, after all, not yet been adopted by makers of exotic wines. But, while it abundantly showed on my face, I did not verbally express anything to suggest that I had messed up my order, and that I was not a **connoisseur**[59] of fine food and vintage wine. I stuck to my instruction and drank a glass of white wine followed by a glass of red wine.

I have since bought a very thick and rather expensive book on the fine art of winemaking, with the honourable

[58] **Bemuse** means to bewilder, puzzle, or confuse: *I was **amused** by the comedy show, but the unbelievable magic tricks in the very next performance left me **bemused**.*

[59] **Connoisseur** is a person with special knowledge or appreciation of a field, especially one of the fine arts, or in matters of taste: *a connoisseur of modern art*. Connoisseur is also a discerning judge of the best in any field: *a connoisseur of horses*.

intention of unravelling the mysteries (and, more important, pronunciations) of Syrah (or Shiraz), Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Sangiovese, Barbera (all reds) and Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Moscato, Pinot Grigio, Gewürztraminer, and Riesling (all whites) wines.☺

6

PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE AT XLRI

A little after I joined my engineering job, some realizations started slowly dawning on me and some of my colleagues. One was that we were not passionate about working on the shop floor. I had visited factories during the course of my engineering degree and, courtesy the Internet, also taken virtual tours of some of the best factories overseas. The sheer power and precision of metal-bending presses and cutting tools, robots spray-painting cars and welding metal pieces together, engineers walking briskly on the shop floor or poring over charts and designs in their offices, looked pretty impressive then.

But as soon as we figured out the nuts and bolts of industrial processes and technology, what suddenly started bothering us was the heat and steam coming out of these heavy machines, the constant grime on our hands from the grease that kept their parts lubricated, the noises they made to declare a job well done, and the fact that we were supposed to be always on our feet and often, only on our toes, walking briskly or running from one corner of the shop floor to another. Simply put, we wanted to rest our feet, cushion our backs and our seats, and work at computers in air-conditioned offices.

The other issue that was nagging us was how not to get limited to a bachelor's degree and somehow add further respectability to our qualifications with at least a master's degree if not a Ph.D. With limited options in India in the early 1990s to get absorbed into R&D, a master's in engineering looked like a career limiting option, unless someone was keen on becoming a college professor or wanted to study for the Indian Administrative Services examination on a government grant (students in master's programmes earned a stipend).

I was particularly keen on a master's degree for another reason. My sister (then a medical student) would eventually get married and most likely move to another city, so it would be important for me to fill the void and restore the balance of one doctor and one engineer in the family, as planned right from school days. However, unlike a bachelor's degree in engineering, which helped you specialize from the beginning, a bachelor's in medicine and surgery (MBBS) had to be supplemented with a master's in a specific field.

Would a postgraduate medico consent to marry a bachelor of engineering? That was now a big question. The probability looked bleak unless someone was marrying a doc who was a sweetheart from school. Hence, a master's in business administration (MBA) was zeroed in on as a respectable degree that would hopefully take us away from the heat and steam, give respite to tired legs, and enhance our eligibility in the marriage market.

Time flew in earning our daily bread and preparing for the MBA entrances. An interview call from XLRI was delightful news. I now availed an unpaid leave of three weeks to brush up my current affairs and long-forgotten exotic hobbies. I reached the interview hall in New Delhi well ahead of my slotted time for the interview. This is a good practice

but mingling with the other MBA hopefuls and checking out the types of questions being asked by the panel was a grave mistake.

Apparently, there was a notorious statistics professor who was hell-bent on grilling everyone on their subjects of study, professional experience if any, and the hobbies they **professed**[1] to be interested in. A fellow hopeful came out looking more hassled than dejected. He had mentioned Ayn Rand as his favourite writer and *The Fountainhead* as his favourite book. The professor asked him to explain the difference between an *Ionic* and a *Doric* column. These words are mentioned on page so-and-so of the book, the professor casually informed him, after the self-proclaimed *Fountainhead* fan claimed never to have heard of these words.

A student who had studied commerce for his bachelor's was asked to explain the significance of **maritime**[2] routes. Maritime was not a new term for him, except that he thought it was written as two separate words. Thus, he began his **discourse**[3] on 'marry time rules' with the prescription of a

[1] **Profess** means (1) to declare oneself skilled or expert in; claim to have knowledge of, often insincerely; pretend to: *he professed to know more about astronomy than he actually did*; (2) to declare openly; announce or affirm; avow or acknowledge: *he professed admiration for Howard's talent in architectural design*; (3) to affirm faith in or allegiance to a religion, God, etc.; and (4) to make a thing one's profession or business.

[2] **Maritime** means (1) relating to ships or navigation or sea or seamen: *maritime law; marine insurance; maritime resources*; (2) bordering on or living or characteristic of those near the sea: *maritime provinces; maritime plants; maritime cultures*; and (3) characteristic of a sailor; resembling a mariner: *maritime clothing*.

[3] **Discourse** means a debate in written or spoken communication, often across many interactions spread across time: *the evolution of*

minimum age of 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys and followed that up with a commentary on how child marriage was a big **scourge**[4] of our society.

You can imagine my state as I was the next person who got called in. The interview started off well with a simple question. I was asked to differentiate between the predominantly theoretical studies during the engineering course and the practical realities of working on the shop floor installing, commissioning, operating, and maintaining machines. I was also able to articulate the technical reasons well, in response to the next question on how electronic ignition helps to increase the fuel efficiency of automobiles.

The notorious statistics professor, who claimed literature as his first love, computers his second and statistics his third, now took over. He asked me to tell him the time of day when the hour and the minute hand of the clock make an angle of 15 degrees. Oh how simple! I thought. 'Sir, that would be three o'clock as well as nine o'clock,' I responded, quickly and confidently. I was made to realize that my response had inflated the angle six times and given more time to think. 'Since there could be multiple answers to this question,' the professor said in a helpful tone, 'you can simply derive the equation and leave out the numerical outcomes.'

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nanotechnology will add another dimension to the age-old discourse on whether machines can replace man. It also means a formal discussion of a subject in speech or writing, as a dissertation, treatise, or sermon.

[4] **Scourge** means a source of widespread dreadful affliction, calamity, and devastation such as that caused by disease or war: *the police is mounting an operation across the county to tackle the scourge of drunken violence*; *disease and famine are scourges of humanity*. It is also a means of inflicting severe suffering, torture, vengeance, or punishment.

When my frozen mind refused to **thaw**,[5] the professor moved on and took note of how I loved the English language and its vagaries and idiosyncrasies. Instead of letting me impress him and the other panellists with several well-rehearsed witty examples of each kind, he asked me the most difficult question I had ever been asked in an interview: 'What is *semiology*? Can you also explain its relevance to economics and its relationship with it?'

There were only a couple of similar sounding words (called **homophones**[6]) in my active memory bank before this D-day. One was **seismology**, the study and measurement of earthquakes, and the other **sinology**, the study of the Chinese language, literature, history, and customs. Seismology did have a **ravaging**[7] impact on the *economy* of a country affected by an earthquake, and with a lot of multinational companies moving their factories to China, even sinology could be related to the creation of mutual *economic* benefit. However, I was certain that neither earthquakes nor China had any relationship with this word *semiology*. I

[5] **Thaw** means (1) to melt or change from frozen to liquid/semi-liquid state; (2) to be freed from the physical effect of frost or extreme cold (sometimes followed by 'out'): *sit by the fire and thaw out*; (3) to become less formal, reserved, or aloof: *he thawed at receiving such a warm welcome from other club members*; and (4) to become less hostile or tense: *international relations between the two countries thawed after the heads of states met and agreed to amicably resolve the border dispute.*

[6] **Homophones** are words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings (and spellings): *hare* and *hair*, *night* and *knight*. There are also rare instances of words that are pronounced the same but have totally opposite meanings (*raze* and *raise*).

[7] **Ravage** means devastating or destructive action. It also means to wreak havoc upon: *the ravages of war*.

surmised[8] that *semiology* had something to do with **simians,** an ape or a monkey, and I almost blurted it out.Good I didn't! Further prodding of my grey cells helped me to unlock the actual meaning of the word from the recesses of my memory.

In fact, during the three-week preparatory leave (without pay) for this interview, I had come across an article on the founder of MARG, a market research company, and a lady with an unusual qualification. She had done her bachelor's in English literature, master's in history, and Ph.D in semiology (another word for semiotics)—*the study of signs and symbols*.

Thereafter it was easy. I was able to link this word to *economics* through the increasing role communication is playing in promoting economic growth and *signs and symbols* being one of the modes of communication. To illustrate, we use a variety of gestures in everyday life to convey various messages to people around us, such as rubbing our thumb and forefinger together to signify money.

I believe this response swung the fate of the interview in my favour and I was able to convert my interview call into an offer to join the business management programme at XLRI (1994–96). When I joined and started consuming the course books and case study material, I realized that the language of management was not too different from the language of the common people. Most students on campus hadn't heard of the term *semiology* and seniors claimed not to have used it thus far in their course work. There was of course emphasis on specific words and phrases like synergy,

[8] **Surmise** is to think or infer without certain or strong evidence, to conjecture or guess: *the team surmised that his promotion was as much an outcome of his alleged high connections as his technical capabilities.*

strategy, brand recall, core competency, back to basics, supply chain, distribution channel, target market, unique selling proposition (USP), appreciation and depreciation, assets and liabilities, mergers and acquisitions (M&As), working capital, net present value (NPV), convexity and duration of a bond, and so on.

One word I heard my seniors use very often when discussing their strategy and marketing projects was **swat**[9] analysis. I had only used swat (pronounced 'swot') in connection with swatting flies with rackets but had never analysed that action in great detail. This swat (spelt SWOT) analysis, I discovered, was a strategic planning tool used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats involved in a project or in a business venture.

One of our earliest marketing classes was on the concept and importance of branding. Our professor was of the opinion that a unique and powerful brand name, especially if it can be pronounced in all major languages of the world, is a key ingredient to the success of a product or service. Of course, the innate quality and features of the product, its positioning, promotion, pricing, and place of availability all help to carve out its unique brand personality.

As per our professor, a good brand name is usually neither too short nor too long, and hence a five-letter word is just right. There were recommendations on starting the name

[9] **Swat** means to hit, slap, or smack: *he swatted the fly with a folded newspaper*. In sports, it means to hit (a ball) powerfully, usually over a long distance. As a noun, it preserves the same meaning i.e. a smart blow, a slap, a smack, or a powerfully hit ball: *he gave the wasp a swat*. SWAT is also an acronym for Special Weapons and Tactics team, a special section of law enforcement agencies trained and equipped to deal with dangerous or violent situations, such as hostage-taking and rioting.

with one of the powerful letters like K, N, L, etc. There were further suggestions about how vowels must be at second and fourth/fifth position for the word to resonate well when pronounced. He offered the examples of Kodak, Lexus, Nokia, Xerox, etc. to prove this hypothesis.

'**Kodak** does not exist in the English lexicon,' he mentioned, 'but was a **neologism**[10] coined by George Eastman as a trademark for his first simple camera in 1888.' He added, 'The letter K was a favourite with Eastman; he found it strong and incisive. He and his mom created the word Kodak using an **anagram**[11] set and he thought that this word had the merits of a trademark word; it was short, unique and could be easily pronounced in any language across the world.'

'Xerox also fitted the bill to the T. Unfortunately it has become **generic**[12] and now people xerox—when they

[10] **Neologism** is a new word, meaning, usage, or phrase; introduction or use of new words or new senses of existing words. Some of the popular examples are app (short for application), podcast (from iPod and broadcast), and blog (shortening of weblog). In psychiatry, it means a new word, often consisting of a combination of other words that is understood only by the speaker, and occurring most often in the speech of schizophrenics (e.g. use of *nsens* for nonsense).

[11] **Anagram** means a word, phrase, or sentence formed from another by rearranging its letters. For instance, *angel* and *satin* are anagrams of *glean* and *stain*.

[12] **Generic** means (1) relating to or descriptive of an entire group or class; general; (2) a drug or a chemical sold under or identified by its official non-proprietary or chemical name and not under a brand name. For instance, paracetamol is the generic drug sold under brand names like Calpol, Crocin, etc. In grammar, it refers to words that specify neither masculine nor feminine gender: For example, generic nouns like doctor, pilot, engineer, executive, etc. Generic is also a wine that is a blend of several grape varieties and does not carry the name of any specific grape.

should be photocopying—even on Canon and other brands,' he rued.

'Do you know that Jeep is a brand name too?' he asked. Since almost all of us (barring the quiz pros) mistook Jeep to be a generic name for all SUVs, he proceeded to **regale**[13] us with its interesting tale. 'Jeep is a brand name now owned by Chrysler.[14] This word owes its origin to **slurring**[15] of the letters GP, which most people believe, stood for Government Purpose or General Purpose. However, it is also highly likely that the word was a part of the Ford factory terminology. It is said that G was used by Ford to differentiate between vehicles produced for the government and for civilian use. (A = passenger car, B = bus, C = commercial vehicle, etc.) All the vehicles that Ford built for the government started with a G for government. After G followed a letter that stood for the wheelbase in ascending alphabetical order and hence the models were named GA, GB, GC, GD, GE, etc. When Ford got to a wheelbase of 80 inches (jeep size), they were at P.'

[13] **Regale** means to provide with great enjoyment, to entertain lavishly or agreeably. It also means to entertain sumptuously with food and drink; provide a feast for: *he often regales his colleagues with a sumptuous dinner at his home and many anecdotes from his action-packed stint in the armed forces.*

[14] The former Chrysler Corporation acquired the Jeep brand, along with the remaining assets of its owner American Motors, in 1987. Chrysler merged with Daimler-Benz in 1998 to form DaimlerChrysler. DaimlerChrysler eventually sold most of its interest in Chrysler to a private equity company in 2007. Chrysler and the Jeep division now operate as Chrysler Group LLC.

[15] **Slur** means to pronounce (a syllable, word, etc.) indistinctly by combining, reducing, or omitting sounds, as in a hurried or careless utterance. It also means to talk about someone or something disparagingly, or insultingly.

Incidentally, in the US military, the High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV), better known as the Humvee, has largely **supplanted**[16] the roles formerly served by smaller Jeeps such as Ford's M151 MUTT, the M561 Gama Goat, their ambulance versions, and other light trucks.

'Another critical feature of a global brand is that its name should not have a different meaning in some other language,' our professor cautioned us. He gave the example of **Chevrolet Nova,**[17] a compact automobile manufactured by General Motors from 1962 through 1979. General Motors could not understand why the Nova wasn't selling well in Spanish-speaking America. Then someone pointed out that in Spanish *nova* means 'won't go'!

The art of branding blended very well with my taste in English and associated trivia, and I started researching on fascinating stories behind some other famous brand names. I started with Levi's, my favourite pair of jeans. **Levi's**[18] comes from the name of its founder Levi Strauss and there is an interesting story behind its origin.

[16] **Supplant** means to displace and substitute for another. It also means to usurp the place of someone else, especially through intrigue or underhanded tactics: *the Vice President supplanted the President by winning key presidential aides to his side through promise of more lucrative portfolios.*

[17] **Nova** (astronomy) is an exploding star whose luminosity increases from several thousand to as much as 1,00,000 times its normal level for a short period (several days and occasionally for a few weeks) after which it slowly returns to its former level of luminosity.

[18] These jeans are reputed to be the toughest in the world. There are forty-seven separate sewing operations and seventeen different threads used in each pair. The leather label shows two horses trying to pull apart a pair of jeans. The guarantee—a new pair if they rip!

As the story goes, in 1853, the California gold rush, resulting from speculation of a gold strike in California, was in full swing, and everyday items were in short supply. Levi Strauss, a 24-year-old German immigrant, left New York for San Francisco with a small supply of dry goods with the intention of opening a branch of his brother's New York dry goods business. Shortly after his arrival, a prospector wanted to know what Strauss was selling. When Strauss told him he had rough canvas to use for tents and wagon covers, the prospector said, 'You should have brought pants!' adding that he couldn't find a pair of pants strong enough to last.

Levi Strauss had the brown canvas made into waist overalls. Miners liked the pants, but complained that they tended to chafe. Strauss substituted this brown canvas with a tough twilled cotton cloth from France called *serge*, made by the André family in the Nimes region. Hence it was originally called *serge de Nimes*, which was soon shortened to *denim*

(from French *de Nimes*—'from Nimes'). Strauss got it dyed deep blue, which has become the standard Levi's colour ever since and got the pants their nickname 'blue jeans'.

Incidentally, as early as 1567, history has recorded merchant sailors from Genoa, Italy, wearing trousers and clothing made of the fabric that evolved into denim. The people of Genoa were known as Genoese. This is the root of the word **jeans**.

Levi Strauss took pleasure in making a rugged but comfortable pair of jeans, and I discovered that my favourite Levi's (without the apostrophe) is a root in English and means 'light'. So while I could not link the meaning of *levis* to the characteristics of my favourite Levi's, I shall proceed to shed some light on some of the words that owe their origin to this root.

Levity means lightness in weight. Besides, it also denotes lightness of temper or conduct that shows lack of respect and seriousness. **Alleviate**[19] means to lighten, usually someone's sufferings: *just before elections, politicians announce financial and employment packages, **purportedly**[20] aimed at alleviating the suffering of the poor and the underprivileged.* When something is so light that it can rise or float in the air, that act is called **levitation**. Levitate is often used for lightness as a result of some supernatural power that overcomes gravity: *the magician claimed that he could*

[19] A close synonym of alleviate is **ameliorate**, though not from the same root 'levis'. **Ameliorate** is to make or become better, more bearable or more satisfactory; improve, not necessarily suffering, but anything: *my editor ameliorated the manuscript with his changes.*

[20] **Purportedly** is an adjective used to describe something that is alleged, supposed, rumoured, reputed, or claimed; *he purportedly inherited his money but I have a suspicion that he came by it less honestly.*

get anyone from the audience to levitate. Interestingly, an antonym of 'levitate' is the rhyming word 'gravitate'. **Gravitate** is to move down, sink, or fall under the influence of gravitational force. Since gravity is a natural phenomenon, gravitate also signifies the natural tendency to be strongly attracted to one another: *people from the same fraternity like singers, musicians, and scientists gravitate towards one another.*

As we progressed with our course, one thing that struck me as unique was that most of the teaching during the classes and all the assignments as homework were based on case studies. These case studies would often run into many pages detailing the problem and providing supporting data for its resolution. My first challenge was to comprehend the matter correctly and it invariably meant starting out with learning about the difficult English words embedded in the text. The case studies that were brief presented another type of challenge. They were devoid of all supporting data and we had to construct it through primary and secondary research.

Imagine our **plight**[21] when we were handed out a brief marketing case study on Mountain Man Brewing Co. titled **Bringing the Brand to Light.**[22]

I won't get into the details of the challenges faced in data gathering and the proposed solution. However, I first had to understand the terms like 'hoi polloi' and 'bourgeois'.

[21] **Plight** means a condition, state, or situation, especially an unfavourable or unfortunate one: *plight of sea turtles is well known and all seven species are thought to be endangered.*

[22] http://cb.hbsp.harvard.edu/cb/product/2069-PDF-ENG, with a few changes to illustrate the point, last accessed on 12 September 2012

Bringing the Brand to Light

Description:

Chris Prangel, a recent MBA graduate, has returned home to West Virginia to manage the marketing operations of Mountain Man Beer Company, a family-owned business that he stands to inherit in five years. Mountain Man brews just one beer, Mountain Man Lager, also known as 'West Virginia's beer' and popular among the hoi polloi, especially blue-collar workers. Due to changes in demographics, there has been a marked shift in beer drinkers' taste preferences, and the company is now experiencing declining sales for the first time in its history. In response, Chris wants to launch Mountain Man Light, a 'light beer' formulation of Mountain Man Lager, in the hope of attracting younger drinkers from the bourgeois. However, he encounters resistance from senior managers. Mountain Man Lager's brand equity is a key asset for Mountain Man Brewing Company. The question is whether Mountain Man Light will enhance it, detract from it, or irreversibly damage it.

Learning Objective:

To explore brand equity: its creation and using brands as platforms for growth; the risks and benefits of a product line extension (including congruent versus incongruent extensions) using an existing brand name; and the concepts of cannibalization and brand alienation. To practise marginal analysis, break-even analysis, net present value analysis, and sensitivity analysis, emphasizing the difficulty in choosing between qualitative and quantitative information in making key strategic decisions.

I discovered that these words are used to describe citizens in the collective. The word **hoi polloi** means the common people, the masses and it is often preceded by 'the' in usage. It comes from Greek *hoi*—'the' and polloi, which is the plural of *polus*—'many'. Some people often mistakenly use this word to mean the elite, possibly because it sounds like hoity-toity. I discovered that hoi polloi has a synonym in the word **plebeian**, which comes from Latin *plebes*—'the common man'. In contrast, there is a **patrician** (from Latin pater—'father'): a nobleman, a person of high birth and refined upbringing, manners, and taste.

The word **bourgeois** represents a class that is a step ahead of the common man—the middle class. I discovered that in Marxist theory, it also means a member of the property-owning class. Bourgeois comes from French *burgeis*—'citizen of a town'.

This became my routine with almost all case studies. Invariably, they would have words I needed to comprehend before I went about resolving the real life or hypothetical issues presented through them. The great thing about these case studies is that there usually are no right or wrong answers.

Once we had a serious discussion on the recent launch of Pepsodent and Mentadent G[23] brands of toothpastes by Hindustan Lever Ltd[24] on the back of a hugely successful existing brand called Close-Up. Both new launches had distinct target markets and focused marketing communication. The question was to analyse and recommend if Colgate Palmolive

[23] Mentadent G is now renamed as Pepsodent G.

[24] Hindustan Lever Ltd was rechristened Hindustan Unilever Ltd in June 2007.

(CP), the market leader in toothpastes, should protect its turf and market share by launching new brand names or only brand extensions.

The class had strong views on this subject and opinions were sharply divided. My friend Chirag was in our group that presented against brand extensions. He was a passionate **proponent**[25] of new brand names and was handling the slides on the recommendations of our group. Since there was a strong reaction in the class against our recommendations, he decided to silence the critics by declaring that only time will give him his due **vindictive**[26] and he will compare notes when we meet for our tenth reunion. I am sure most of the class understood that Chirag wanted to say **vindication**[27] in his declaration but he had driven the message home and that's what mattered to our group.

[25] **Proponent** means a person who puts forward a proposition or proposal, who supports a cause or doctrine, who argues in favour of something; an advocate: *I am an ardent proponent of changing to energy efficient light bulbs*. Proponent also means a person who **propounds** (puts forward, submits, proposes, or offers for consideration, acceptance, or adoption) a legal instrument, such as a will for *probate*. Incidentally, **probate** means the process of legally establishing the validity of a will before a judicial authority; an authenticated copy of a will so certified.

[26] **Vindictive** means (1) disposed or inclined to seek revenge; vengeful: *a vindictive person*; and (2) marked by or resulting from a desire to hurt; spiteful: *he was a vindictive man with a grudge against all successful people*.

[27] **Vindicate** means (1) to clear from guilt, accusation, blame, imputation, etc. as by evidence or argument: *he felt vindicated by the favourable decision of the court*; (2) to provide justification for: *his promotion vindicated his unconventional attitude*; and (3) to uphold, maintain, justify, or defend (a cause, etc.) by argument or evidence: *his idea for employment generation was vindicated when it was adopted by the central government for implementation.*

In reality, CP did launch successful brand extensions like Colgate Total, Colgate Active Salt, Colgate Herbal, Colgate Maxwhite, Colgate Sensitive, Colgate Fresh Energy Gel, etc. In 1994, when they had acquired the Cibaca brand of successful toothpaste from Ciba Geigy, they had the opportunity to retain its name. However, they rebranded Cibaca too as Colgate Cibaca.

It may be a bit unfair to conclude that the stand of the proponents of brand extensions was finally vindicated (especially since I was not one of them). We, unfortunately, do not have the benefit of hindsight here, on what may have been the competitive situation if CP had decided to launch different brand names and not stick solely to brand extensions.

Time flew, thanks to comprehending the over 800 case studies I had to read and resolve, jogging at Jubilee Park nearby with friends Rajdeep Chopra and Neeraj Manchanda, chatting and bonding at the JLT (Just Like That) corner on campus, attending late night parties our cultural club regularly hosted, and giving company in the mess to my friends Surjeet and Saksham.

Surjeet ate so slowly it seemed food was fully digested before it left his mouth, and all his pancreatic, gastric and intestinal juices and enzymes that were secreted to help in this process were completely wasted. Saksham had a different issue. He had begun practising to eat with fork and knife from the day he joined the business management programme. Progress was slow due to his **penchant**[28] for table manners and also the **modicum**[29] of meat on the starved chicken

[28] **Penchant** means a strong inclination, taste, or liking for something: *a penchant for adventure sports.*

[29] **Modicum** means a moderate or small amount: *there is not a modicum of truth in your story.*

served to us—it had to be carefully picked from every **nook and cranny**.[30]

Towards the middle of our final year, I became conscious of the impending placement season and plunged myself into a comprehensive revision of course books and my projects. I also **refurbished**[31] my knowledge of current affairs and developments that had economic and financial consequences.

In all this, some of us managed to make time to pull off a **spoof**[32] on the junior batch. A friend of one of our batchmates was visiting and he was successfully persuaded to give a talk to the junior batch before his company started hiring summer interns the next day. Overnight, a presentation on one of the best-known marketing companies was created and a standard résumé was customized to include a question on 'The most embarrassing moment in my life'. Most of the juniors sat through the impressive presentation and some—hoping to brighten their chances of selection—asked profound questions on the company's branding, distribution and M&A strategies. Over 100 résumés were submitted and the junior batch anxiously waited for the shortlist to be displayed on

[30] **Nook and cranny** means something remote: *I've searched for it in every nook and cranny, and I still can't find it*. This metaphoric idiom pairs *nook*, which has meant 'an out-of-the-way corner' since the mid-1300s, with *cranny*, which has meant 'a crack or crevice' since about 1440. Neither noun is heard much other than in this idiom.

[31] **Refurbish** means to furbish again, to brighten, to renovate, etc. **Furbish** means to restore to freshness of appearance or good condition (often followed by 'up'): *most of the hotel's elegantly furbished rooms boast stunning views from private balconies*.

[32] **Spoof** means (1) a mocking imitation of someone or something, usually light and good-humoured; lampoon or parody: *the play was a spoof of college life*; and (2) a hoax; a prank.

the bulletin board for this first marketing company to visit the campus for summer placement. Next day, the bulletin board was overflowing and almost the entire wall was full of cutouts of the varied and hilarious responses to 'The most embarrassing moment in my life'!

Midway through the course, I had shifted my **allegiance**[33] from marketing to finance. Naturally, I applied to all the multinational banks that were visiting the campus. The salaries being offered were not significantly different, especially after normalizing the cost differential between a furnished bachelor accommodation provided at Colaba[34] or at Bandra[35] or beyond. Three of the multinational banks were also offering initial training in different parts of Europe and for different durations.

It was an unwritten rule that one could save enough from the **per diem**[36] offered during this overseas training period, either to fund a honeymoon or to furnish one's apartment. The need for furnishing arose as married accommodation

[33] **Allegiance** means the loyalty of a citizen to his or her government or of a subject to his or her sovereign. It also means loyalty or devotion to a person, group, or cause: *his commitment to both camps makes the question of his ultimate allegiance a difficult one.*

[34] Forming the southern tip of Mumbai, Colaba is a historical island and a great tourism attraction. It is close to the Gateway of India, the most visited spot of the city.

[35] Bandra is a neighbourhood in west-central Mumbai. It has earned the sobriquet (nickname) 'Queen of the Suburbs'.

[36] ***Per diem*** is a Latin term that literally means 'by the day' or 'for each day'. It is a daily allowance, usually for living expenses while travelling in connection with one's work or being employed at a distance from one's home: *employees are entitled to a per diem of 100 dollars if they travel to North America, Western Europe, or Japan; for other destinations, it gets reduced to 70 dollars.*

was provided on an unfurnished basis. There were many management graduates like me, who had logged in some years of pre-MBA experience and were keen to change their marital status as soon as they were placed with reputed MNCs.

Consistent academic performance, positions of importance held, notable achievements in extracurricular activities, excellent command over the language, and overall personality played key roles in whether someone got into a Day 0, Day 1, or a Day 2 job. Given the small size of the batch, everyone was sort of assured of a job within the first four days of the placement process.

With my consistent track record of ignoring extracurricular activities and elections for important positions, I was banking heavily on my good grades (right from early school days), my much improved command over the English language, and my belief of being blessed with a good personality.

During my interview with the bank that eventually hired me, my intensive preparations seemed to be paying off well. The panel then started asking technical questions on banking which were strictly out of the syllabus and I had to politely draw their attention to this fact. Finally, as had always happened in all earlier interviews, the focus shifted to my interesting and unusual hobbies. However, instead of quizzing me in my areas of strength, they decided to test my creativity. It seemed they had **extrapolated**[37] my creativity from the extracurricular interests I had created.

'Of course you know why manhole covers are round,' they asked me in such a reassuring tone that I had no option but to

[37] **Extrapolate** means to infer or estimate by extending or projecting known information. In mathematics, it means to estimate (a value of a variable outside a known range) from values within a known range by assuming that the estimated value follows logically from the known values:

nod my head in agreement, even when I had no clue why. 'Can you tell us three reasons why you believe they should *not* be made in any other shape?' My heartbeat accelerated faster than the fastest Formula 1 racing car and, unlike that competitive sport, no pit stop was in sight to give me some respite where I could think creatively. I realized I was pitted against some of my more accomplished and well-rounded classmates and if I did not come up with some convincing creativity quickly, my Day 1 placement possibilities would dive into a deep pit.

I cried for His help. The Lord showered instant mercy. He restored my heartbeat to near normal, blessed me with a sudden burst of creativity, and I started doling out one convincing reason after another:

Why are manhole covers round?

- Manhole covers are round to prevent **warping**[38] under heavy vehicular traffic, since all points on the concentric circles in a round object are equidistant from the centre and hence loaded equally.
- They are round as the pits they cover are cylindrical and not squarish. Pits need to be cylindrical to avoid sharp corners and ensuring smooth flow of the sewage. Cylinders also have more volume for the same surface area as compared

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the animal rights activists vehemently oppose scientific experimentation on animals, based on overwhelming scientific evidence that findings from animal models cannot be reliably extrapolated for humans.

[38] **Warp** means (1) to bend or twist out of shape, especially from a straight or flat form, as timbers or flooring; (2) to bend or turn from the natural or true direction or course; (3) to distort or cause to distort from the truth, fact, true meaning, etc.; bias; falsify: *only a warped mind can produce such biased opinions.*

to the pits with a square base. Hence, less material is consumed in making cylindrical pits.

- Manhole covers are round so that they can be easily rolled to the location where they need to be fixed instead of having to lift them, as it is not always possible to park the wagon ferrying them at the exact location of the pit.
- They are round because . . .

At this point, one of the panelists had to stop me with his magical words . . . 'You are hired!'

Apparently, the most commonly known reason, I later discovered, is that a round cover cannot fall into the pit, even accidentally, and hence, poses no danger to the lives of people cleaning or repairing the pits. A square cover can fall inside along the diagonal and a rectangle shaped cover, along the diagonal and along the longer edge.

I was required to fly into Mumbai on 19 May 1996 on the company's expense, check into Taj President[39] at Colaba for a weeklong **induction**[40] programme before starting my day

[39] The Taj President has now been rechristened Vivanta by Taj.

[40] **Induction** means (1) the act or an instance of inducting, introduction, or initiation; (2) a ceremony or formal act by which a person is inducted, as into office or military service; and (3) the act of inducing, bringing about, or causing: *the ambience of the room helped the psychotherapist in speedier induction of the hypnotic state in her patients*. In the field of logic, induction means (1) the process of deriving general principles from particular facts or instances, and (2) a conclusion reached by this process. This word also has meanings in the field of mathematics (concept of mathematical induction), electricity and magnetism (if you recollect electromagnetic and electrostatic induction from your school science book), embryology, and biochemistry, and you can check any good dictionary to expand your understanding of this word.

job at the corporate and investment banking division of the bank. My lavishly furnished bachelor's accommodation had already been arranged at Green Acres Apartments, Nargis Dutt Road, Pali Hill, Bandra (West), Mumbai 400 050.

'Please make sure that you have a **passport,**[41] that it does not expire within the next year, and that it has an ECNR (Emigration Check Not Required) stamp,' cautioned the head of human resources. 'Within a month of your joining, we will send you for a month-long training to our global training centre in Europe,' he mentioned, as he smiled and shook my hand and handed over my offer letter. 'Do not forget to let me know if you think of any more reasons why manhole covers should be round,' he **chuckled,**[42] patted my back, and joined the other panelists waiting in their car to go back to—soon to be mine—Mumbai.

As soon as the placement process concluded, cricket fever engulfed the campus. Since the pecking order had been established (based on selection in Day 0, Day 1, or Day 2 of the placement season), batchmates embarked on the clinical process of selection of life partners. This looked **parochial**[43] to me in the beginning but, as an afterthought, I

[41] To leave a country and go to another, one requires a **passport.** Originally, as the word indicates, it was meant as a permission to leave a port or sail into it. Later, this was extended to include a general permission of exit and entry.

[42] **Chuckle** means to laugh softly or amusedly, usually with satisfaction: *they chuckled at the child's efforts to walk*. Chuckle also means to laugh to oneself: *he sat chuckling over a funny book*.

[43] **Parochial** means (1) narrow in outlook or scope; provincial: *I think business people are far too parochial in their intake of stimuli that could help them innovate*; and (2) (Christianity/Ecclesiastical terms) of or relating to a parish or parishes or the parochial schools (or the education they provide).

concluded it was quite a practical approach to life. Some were feverishly attempting to bowl a maiden over, some were busy deflecting or playing the hook shot, and some were waiting to be caught and bowled. I enjoyed this **melee**[44] in the **slog overs**[45] from the sidelines and hoped that I would not need to show my **prowess**[46] on the cricket field to find a suitable medico match.

[44] **Melee** means (1) a confused hand-to-hand fight or struggle among several people; and (2) confusion; turmoil; jumble: *the melee of Christmas shopping.*

[45] **Slog overs** are the final ten overs in a One-Day International cricket match, in which a batting side with wickets in hand can bat aggressively, and in which bowlers are, usually, hit for lots of runs. Bowlers who bowl at this time are said to 'bowl at the death'.

[46] **Prowess** means (1) exceptional valour, bravery, or ability, especially in combat or battle; and (2) exceptional or superior ability, skill, or strength: *what he lacks in attacking prowess, he more than makes up for with his defensive qualities.*

7

CAPITAL SQUARE

It was 20 May 1996, the day I along with other management graduates and chartered accountants joined this large multinational bank at Mumbai. We were put up at Taj President at Colaba, Mumbai, which, for most of us, was the very first experience of staying at a five-star hotel. Already **overawed**[1] by the skyscrapers of South Mumbai and the **opulence**[2] of a five-star property, around thirty of us waited with **bated**[3] breath—in one of the conference rooms—for the proceedings to begin.

[1] **Overawe** means to overcome or subdue by inspiring **awe** (a mixed emotion of reverence, respect, dread, and wonder inspired by authority, genius, great beauty, sublimity, or might): *he was overawed at the sight of the Grand Canyon.*

[2] **Opulence** means wealth, riches, or affluence. It also means abundance, as of resources or goods; plenty: *the opulence at display in the south of France is quite unnerving for a common traveller.*

[3] **With bated breath** means with breath drawn in or held because of anticipation or suspense: *we watched with bated breath as the runners approached the finish line.* **Bate**, as a word, means to lessen, subside, or diminish the force or intensity of; to abate; to moderate or restrain: *even a series of setbacks did not bate his resolve to join*

The first person to walk in was an impressive looking, extremely well-dressed gentlemen, who was introduced to us as head of the corporate finance and capital markets group (abbreviated as CFCM). He was carrying a bulky, black radio transmitter into which he was saying something that sounded like: '*Make up your mind Tiger. You wanna pitch them mezz. capital as sub. debt or a pref. stock or a seven year convertible, with a call and put at five.*'[4] Naturally, we did not understand most of what he said and wondered if this was department-specific or our-bank-specific terminology, or used by the entire banking industry globally to converse with each other!

Before he began his address, he relaxed his tired arm by putting down his radio transmitter on the table, giving us our first clear view to marvel at this **contraption.**[5] How did he manage to **wrangle**[6] it out of the hands of some

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the North Pole Marathon Grand Slam Club by running a marathon on each of the seven continents and on the Arctic Ocean in the North Pole Marathon.

[4] Incidentally, since I now understand, let me reconstruct the statement for you: '*You wanna pitch them mezzanine capital as subordinate debt or a preferred stock, or a seven year convertible, with a call and put option at the end of five years from the date of issue.*'

[5] **Contraption** is a mechanical device, a gadget: *in the early years, ingenious contraptions were devised to simplify human effort and improve productivity.*

[6] **Wrangle** means to obtain, often by argument, contrivance or scheming: *he wrangled a job through insider information before others could even get a wind of the opening.* It also means to argue or dispute, especially in a noisy or angry manner: *time should not be wasted on wrangling over matters which are of no consequence.*

policeman on **patrol**,[7] we wondered! It was only later we realized that what we had witnessed on 20 May 1996 was the first live demonstration of a mobile phone in action, a Motorola or a Nokia I don't exactly recollect now, as it's been sixteen years!

He did not believe in any theoretical discussion and straightaway started off with real-life examples where he had organized large corporate M&As, offered advisory on capital restructuring, taken companies public, helped corporates and even financial institutions raise funds through leveraged financing, mezzanine debt, perpetual cumulative and non-cumulative preference capital, optionally and compulsorily convertible *bonds*, not to forget initial public offers (IPOs) and follow-on public offers (FPOs). He and his team routinely worked sixteen hours a day and were available 24/7. 'Welcome to the fascinating world of investment banking,' he said in conclusion.

Till that parting remark registered in my head, I had taken a very literal meaning of this term. I had assumed investment banking meant managing corporate investments and parking them in esoteric instruments that yielded supernormal returns to the bank clients. Thanks to the complex terminology and the fact that 'corporate finance and capital markets' sounded critical to corporate survival and growth, we became intensely

[7] **Patrol** means the act of moving about an area especially by an authorized and trained person or group, for purposes of observation, inspection, or security; a person or group of persons who perform such an act. In military use, a small group of soldiers, often a squad or platoon, sent out on a reconnaissance or combat mission; one or more military vehicles, boats, ships, or aircraft assigned to guard or reconnoitre a given area: *the police patrols become more frequent around election times.*

interested in exploring CFCM for placement opportunities, both for short-term projects and final placement after two years of rotational training.

The head of CFCM was immediately followed by a soft-spoken, dignified gentleman, introduced as the head of our treasury. Before his current role, he had a long and distinguished stint as a *bond* trader, where he had gained **notoriety**[8] in the market for being the most aggressive and successful. His lecture **hovered**[9] around bid and offer rates, helping corporates manage cross-border flows through spots and forwards, and hedge the currency and interest rate risks in their balance sheets through derivatives like swaps, futures, and options. He gave a quick demonstration of how to derive cross-currency rates and gave us a similar problem to solve. Most of us failed and, suddenly, guys who were **drooling**[10] at the prospect of working in CFCM suddenly found treasury to be a far sexier option.

After the treasurer, we welcomed the head of the transaction banking group (TBG). He was very impressive and extremely

[8] **Notoriety** means the state, quality, or character of being *notorious*, widely known, or a 'celebrated' (in British use) person: *a craze for notoriety*. Notorious is someone or something that is unfavourably, disreputably, and widely known: *a notorious gambler*. It also means publicly or generally known, as for a particular trait (synonyms: notable, renowned, celebrated, prominent, conspicuous, famous): *a newspaper that is notorious for its sensationalism*.

[9] **Hover** means (1) to remain floating, suspended, or fluttering in air: *the helicopter hovered over the building*; (2) to linger on in a place: *hovering around the speaker's podium*; and (3) to remain in an uncertain or irresolute state; waver: *to hover between life and death; hovered between anger and remorse*.

[10] **Drool** means to water at the mouth, as in anticipation of food; to salivate. It also means to show excessive pleasure or anticipation of pleasure: *he had the audience drooling over his songs*.

articulate. He sketched an **intricate**[11] model of the international supply chain of a large multinational corporation and explained all his products and solutions from the corporate needs arising out of this complex model. For instance, since buyers and sellers usually do not trust each other, his division helped in intermediating international and domestic trade flows by issuing and confirming letters of credit and bid and performance *bonds*.

The TBG also helped in making clients' treasuries more efficient and their balance sheets more **robust,**[12] by offering working capital financing, risk management, and cash management solutions like packing credit and receivables' financing, global payables and receivables, and multi-tier netting and pooling. He added that the custodial function, which involved safekeeping, clearing and settlement of equity and *bond* trades, and corporate action tracking and application, was also a significant part of his business. We were overawed by the sheer size of his empire, when we got to know that his cash management division handled 7 per cent of India's GDP and he held billions of dollars of *bonds* and securities under his management.

Some of us, who had veered towards treasury, now wondered if TBG were the ultimate dream destination. I

[11] **Intricate** means having many interrelated parts or facets; entangled or involved: *an intricate maze*. It also means complex; complicated; hard to understand, work, or make: *an intricate design*.

[12] **Robust** means strong and healthy; hardy; vigorous (*a robust young man; a robust faith; a robust mind*); strongly or stoutly built (*his robust frame*); suited to or requiring bodily strength or endurance (*robust exercise*); rough or crude; boisterous (*robust drinkers and dancers*); and rich and full-bodied (*the robust flavour of freshly brewed coffee*).

also immediately put down a note to inform Prof. H.K. Pradhan, our finance professor back at B-school, to induct a new course on banking products and terminology. This would ensure that new batches did not portray a look of **abject**[13] ignorance and behaved, if not like masters, at least like bachelors of finance.

I also observed that the one theme that ran uniformly in all the presentations was that every division of the bank, among other things, handled *bonds*—some issued by corporate and other institutions, some issued by the Government of India, and some others issued by the bank itself. Do check out the italicized text above if you missed this coincidence. That bonds could exist in so many types had escaped my attention even during management studies.

My first thought at the mention of this term always took me to 'The name is Bond . . . James Bond'. But now, I have had the good fortune of meeting distinguished bond traders, a job I could not **demystify**[14] even when the treasurer tried to simplify it for me during the coffee break. 'A bond trader buys and sells government and corporate securities,' he explained patiently. 'He analyses and interprets the impact of macroeconomic indicators and other significant events on the prices of these securities, with an endeavour to buy low and sell high. What differentiates a successful trader from

[13] **Abject** means utterly hopeless, miserable, humiliating, or wretched: *abject poverty*. It also means contemptible, despicable: *an abject coward*.

[14] **Demystify** means to make less mysterious; clarify: *his role is to demystify the world of high finance and help small investors take sound decisions; his autobiography demystified his career as a charismatic actor, music composer, writer, and a successful director*.

others is that a successful trader buys at **troughs**[15] and sells at **crests**[16] much more often than his contemporaries.'

I could go on and on but I am sure you wouldn't want me to solely focus on unravelling the mysteries behind internal banking terminology. What I also intend to do is to acquaint you with terms that you need to know to interact with your bankers. Along the way, we shall explore the fascinating story of the evolution of currency and banking.

Let us start with the word 'capital'. This word is used in the sense of wealth, money, or a person's principal investment in a business or a profession. Incidentally, even the word 'cattle' derives from the same root, and it does make a lot of sense as in the earliest days, a person's capital or wealth was actually measured in the number and quality of cattle owned. But, once someone had the requisite capital, and wanted to use it to avail of other goods and/or services, what facilitated the transaction was the use of the concept of 'currency'.

Currency is the monetary system used as a means of exchange in any country. We now use paper currency but

[15] **Trough** means (1) a long, narrow, open receptacle, usually boxlike in shape, used for various commercial or household purposes, but chiefly to hold water or food for animals; (2) a channel or conduit for conveying water, as a gutter under the eaves of a building for carrying away rainwater; (3) any long depression or hollow, as between two ridges or waves; and (4) the lowest point, especially in an economic cycle.

[16] **Crest** means (1) the highest part of a hill or mountain range; summit; the head or top of anything; (2) a ridge or ridge-like formation including the ridge of the neck of a horse, dog, etc.; (3) the foamy top of a wave; (4) the highest point or level; climax; culmination; (5) a tuft or other natural growth on the top of the head of an animal, as the comb of a rooster; and (6) an ornament or heraldic device surmounting a helmet.

in the olden times, goods and/or services were directly exchanged for other goods and/or services. This practice was called 'barter' and it was commonly done on a bilateral basis. However, besides the burden of transporting your surplus commodities every time you wanted to buy anything, it was also tough to find a person with complementary needs or with matching view on the valuation of the goods and/or services to be exchanged.

Hence, slowly, this bilateral system of barter evolved into a multilateral system through the creation of a middleman and gave way to use of a single commodity as a means of exchange. Believe it or not, one of the earliest commodities used as a uniform means of exchange was not gold or silver or copper, but salt![17] Incidentally, the word **salary** owes its origin to the practice of accepting a portion of the pay in the form of *salt*, whose production was strictly controlled by the monarchy or ruling elite.

In the early days of Rome, its soldiers were given a handful of salt each day, which they bartered for other needs. The salt ration was subsequently replaced by money not only making it convenient for the soldiers to save it and buy other goods as per their need, but also relieved the **commissariat**[18] of the trouble of transporting salt. The money received by soldiers in lieu of salt was referred to as their 'salt money', which became *salarium* in Latin and finally *salary* in English.

Eventually, the term would make its way into medieval France, where a soldier's payment was known as his *solde*,

[17] Tibetans used yak's milk as a primitive form of currency.

[18] **Commissariat** refers to the organized method or manner by which food, equipment, transport, etc. is delivered to the armies. It is also the name of the department of the army charged with supplying provisions.

and it was paid with a special coin called a *sol*.[19] By extension, the word *solde* also came to refer not only to the soldier's wage but also to the 'soldier' himself.[20] Surprising, isn't it, that the word soldier came from the humble salt?

You will be amazed to know that, in 2007, there was a **resurgence**[21] of traditional spinner dolphin teeth money on the Solomon Islands. While this South Pacific **archipelago**[22] has the dollar as its paper currency, in the period April 2007–April 2008, people poured money into another appreciating currency—dolphin teeth. Shaped like miniature ivory **jalapeños,**[23] the teeth of spinner dolphins had facilitated commerce in parts of the Solomon Islands for centuries before Europeans colonized the Islands and they are still the preferred currency for buying brides.

The traditional currency is gaining in prominence now after years of ethnic strife have undermined the country's economy and rekindled attachment to ancient customs. Even Rick Houenipwela, the governor of the Central Bank of Solomon Islands, admitted that he is an investor in teeth, having purchased a huge amount some years ago. As reported in *Wall Street Journal* on 30 April 2008, one tooth of a spinner

[19] **Sol** was equal to 20 deniers (another type of coin issued in French-speaking regions) and was originally made of gold, later silver, and finally copper. It was introduced in the eighth century CE and discontinued in 1794.

[20] www.seek2know.net/word.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[21] **Resurgence** means continuation after interruption, bringing again into prominence; renewal, rebirth, revival, or recovery: *the resurgence of the middle class after years of oppression at the hands of rich.*

[22] **Archipelago** is a large group or chain of islands.

[23] **Jalapeño** is a hot green or orange-red pepper, the fruit of a variety of species *Capsicum annuum*, used especially in Mexican cooking.

dolphin has jumped to about 2 Solomon Islands dollars (26 US cents) from as little as 50 Solomon Islands cents a year ago. The official currency, pegged to a global currency basket, dominated by the US dollar, has remained relatively stable in the same period.

The tradition has deep roots. Dolphin teeth, dog teeth, and whale teeth (particularly in Fiji) were used as currency in the Solomon Islands and other parts of Melanesia long before European colonizers arrived in the late nineteenth century. Pigs and their curled tusks played a similar role in parts of the neighbouring nation of Vanuatu and parts of Papua New Guinea. They are the wealth of every village and among their highly prized possessions.[24]

Wall Street Journal further reports that while the use of these traditional currencies is dying off elsewhere in the region, there is no sign of the boom in dolphin teeth abating here. Houenipwela says that some entrepreneurs have recently asked him for permission to establish a bank that would take deposits in teeth. A dolphin-tooth bank with clean, insect-free vaults would solve the problem of tooth decay under inappropriate storage conditions, and also deter counterfeiters who pass off fruit bat teeth, which resemble dolphin teeth, for the genuine article. Houenipwela, however, had to turn down the request because only institutions accepting conventional currencies can call themselves banks under Solomon Islands law.☺

[24] Pigs, chosen to produce the highly valued tusks, have their top teeth knocked out. The bottom teeth then grow into the coveted curled tusks. It is then necessary for the pig to be hand-fed for the remainder of its life and tied up, to prevent the animal breaking or damaging the valuable tusks. (Source: http://winaresort.com/blog/blogtag/curled-pig-tusks)

If you recall what you read in your economics textbooks, one of the characteristics of money is that it is generally acceptable for common use. It is this characteristic of currency that gives this word a new usage. **Currency** is the state of general acceptance or use: *your ideas have always enjoyed currency with the members of the board*, implying thereby that they are popular and frequently acceptable. It also means the state of being current and up-to-date: *can you check the currency of this address*?

Think of currencies and the first that comes to mind is the dollar. Interestingly, the word dollar is much older than the American unit of currency, and its history is a story involving many countries in different continents. It is an anglicized form of thaler (pronounced taler, with a long 'a'), the shortened name for the term Joachimsthaler by which the coin was originally known. These coins were first minted in 1519 from locally mined silver in Joachimsthal in Bohemia. Incidentally, Joachimsthal now lies within the borders of the Czech Republic and its Czech name is Jáchymov.

Imagine if someone does not have enough income to meet his or her expenses, that person would be filled with grief and sorrow. Hence a rhyme—*no dollar, so dolour*—may help in internalizing **dolour**, a word that is nearly a homophone to dollar and means grief, sorrow: *the family was filled with dolour when their mortgaged house was attached by the finance company.*

Do you know why the $ sign represents a dollar? It is said that the its origin is from a narrow 'U' superimposed over a wide 'S', 'US' being short for 'United States'. Suggestions have also been made that it derives from an old Spanish way to denote a set of eight coins as I8I. However, it is now widely believed that it derives from a handwritten 'ps', an

abbreviation for 'peso' in old Spanish-American books. Spanish pesos were also called piastres, Spanish dollars, and pieces of eight.[25]

Since three of the four names given above for the Spanish dollar start with 'p' (and pluralize with 's'), it was natural for abbreviations like 'p' and 'ps' to be used. Sometimes 'ps' was written as 'P' with a superscript 's' (P^s). Now, what happens if you write 'P' with a superscript 's' fast? Naturally, you join the letters. Well, now look at the top part of the resulting symbol—that's your $ sign! The symbol first appeared in the 1770s, in manuscript documents of English-Americans who had business dealing with Spanish-Americans.

Did you know that the British pound sterling, the official currency of the UK, and commonly called the pound, originated from Latin word *pendere*—'to weigh'? A **pound** is also a unit of weight and of mass (equal to 0.453 kg), and used in England and some other English-speaking countries, for conducting ordinary commerce. As a verb, pound also means to strike repeatedly with great force, as with one's fist or some instrument.

And what explains its symbol (£)? I know you are keen to know, so here goes. The abbreviation of pound is 'lb' and comes from the Latin word *libra*—scales, balance, and its first alphabet L, written in old-fashioned round-hand, with one or two crossbars to show that it is being used as a symbol or abbreviation, is used as a symbol for this currency (£).

I found it quite amusing that while most countries formerly under British colonial rule adopted the pound as their national currency (Australian pound, £A; New Zealand pound, £NZ), these have now migrated from pound to

[25] The piece of eight was so called because its value was eight reales.

dollar, even though the Queen of England continues to be their monarch!

I also gathered that the word yen (the standard monetary unit of Japan) evolved from the Chinese *yüan*—'circular object'. And I was tempted to use this word to create a memory aid to better assimilate the English word **yen**, which incidentally derives from Chinese *yan*—'craving' and means an intense craving or yearning. Japan continues to reign supreme in consumer electronics and automobiles and we *yen* to possess the goods with an original 'Made in Japan' tag. Hence, the mnemonic is 'our *yen* for Japanese goods' and 'Japanese currency *yen*'. We sometimes yen for some other things as well. One is a wide range of knowledge. So you may simply rhyme—yen for ken—as **ken** means range of knowledge.

Around 5000 BCE, commodity currencies like tea, tobacco, salt, cattle, and seeds were supplemented by metal objects like gold, silver, and copper. However, it took over 4,300 years before the Lydians (Lydia was an Iron Age kingdom of Western Asia Minor, now part of Turkey) started issuing coins made from precious metals and with specific denominations. Interestingly, initially, the value of the precious metal used in a coin, was *exactly* the same as the value as per the denomination of the coin. However, soon after, this gave way to paper currency and coins made from non-precious metal and hence, with nil or negligible self-worth. However, this currency carried a *promise* by the issuing government to replace the paper and coins with equivalent value of precious metals like gold and silver. Hence, this currency came to be known as 'promissory' notes and coins and also as 'representative' money.

Incidentally, do you ever wonder why the British pound was and is known as pound sterling! The reason is that

the government promised to **redeem**[26] a one-pound bill of this representative money with one pound (in weight) of *sterling* silver! **Sterling** (etymologically, a slight corruption of starling—a little star) was the name of a silver coin around 1250–1300 CE with an imprint of—you guessed it—a *little star* on some of the mintages.

Sterling is also the standard of fineness for silver (0.925) now used especially in the manufacture of utensils, jewellery, etc. As an adjective, it also refers to someone who is thoroughly excellent, first-rate, noble, and honourable: *a man of sterling worth*.

Representative money has now been replaced by 'fiat' money. **Fiat** is an official order, promulgation, or a decree and this currency is given its value by law and allowed as a medium of payment to meet one's financial obligation: *the government issued a fiat on policy matters*. This currency is more popularly known as a **legal tender**. I was quite confused with this nomenclature when I first read it, given **tender** means soft, weak, or delicate, and also young or immature, and these were clearly not the qualities one associated with modern money. But how could I forget that if the word 'set' could have as many as 194 meanings, shouldn't 'tender' be entitled to a few of its own!

[26] **Redeem** means (1) to buy back, recover ownership of (something pledged or mortgaged) by paying a specified sum: *to redeem a pawned watch*; (2) to pay off or exchange (bonds, bills of exchange, promissory notes, etc.) with money or goods; (3) to make up for: *the low price of the clothes dryer redeems its lack of special features*; and (4) to discharge or fulfil (a pledge, promise, etc.). Redeem also means to restore the honour, worth, or reputation: *you botched the last job but can redeem yourself on this one*; and to make amends for, offset etc. (some fault, shortcoming, etc.): *his bravery redeemed his youthful idleness*.

Tender come from Anglo-French *tendre*—'to extend or offer' and means to present formally for acceptance, to offer or proffer: *to tender one's resignation.* In legal and commercial parlance, tender is to offer, as money or goods, in payment of debt or any other obligation (say payment for purchase of goods or services). In the world of commerce, we frequently encounter advertisements inviting submission of bids or 'tenders' for execution of certain work or supply of certain commodities and this gives tender its third meaning. Tender is an offer made in writing by one party to another, to execute certain work, or supply certain commodities, etc., at a given cost and within a certain timeframe.

We usually keep our currency with neighbourhood banks, which we believe are safe and stable institutions. Some recent events notwithstanding, this is indeed a reflection of facts from the time banks started to function. It is widely believed that the first banking establishments started operating in Assyria (sum of parts of modern Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran), and Babylonia (now Iraq) sometime in the third millennium BCE when merchants started making loans to farmers and traders that carried goods between cities.

The **collateral**[27] or security for these loans initially consisted of grain and later other goods including cattle, agricultural implements, and eventually precious metals such as gold. No wonder, these banks were located inside palaces and temples, as they were well built and constantly supervised. As sacred places, temples presented an extra

[27] **Collateral** is the security that is pledged at the time of availing a loan, which can be forfeited by the lender in the event of a non-payment. Collateral also means serving to support or corroborate (*collateral evidence*); additional, auxiliary, secondary (*collateral damage in the attack*).

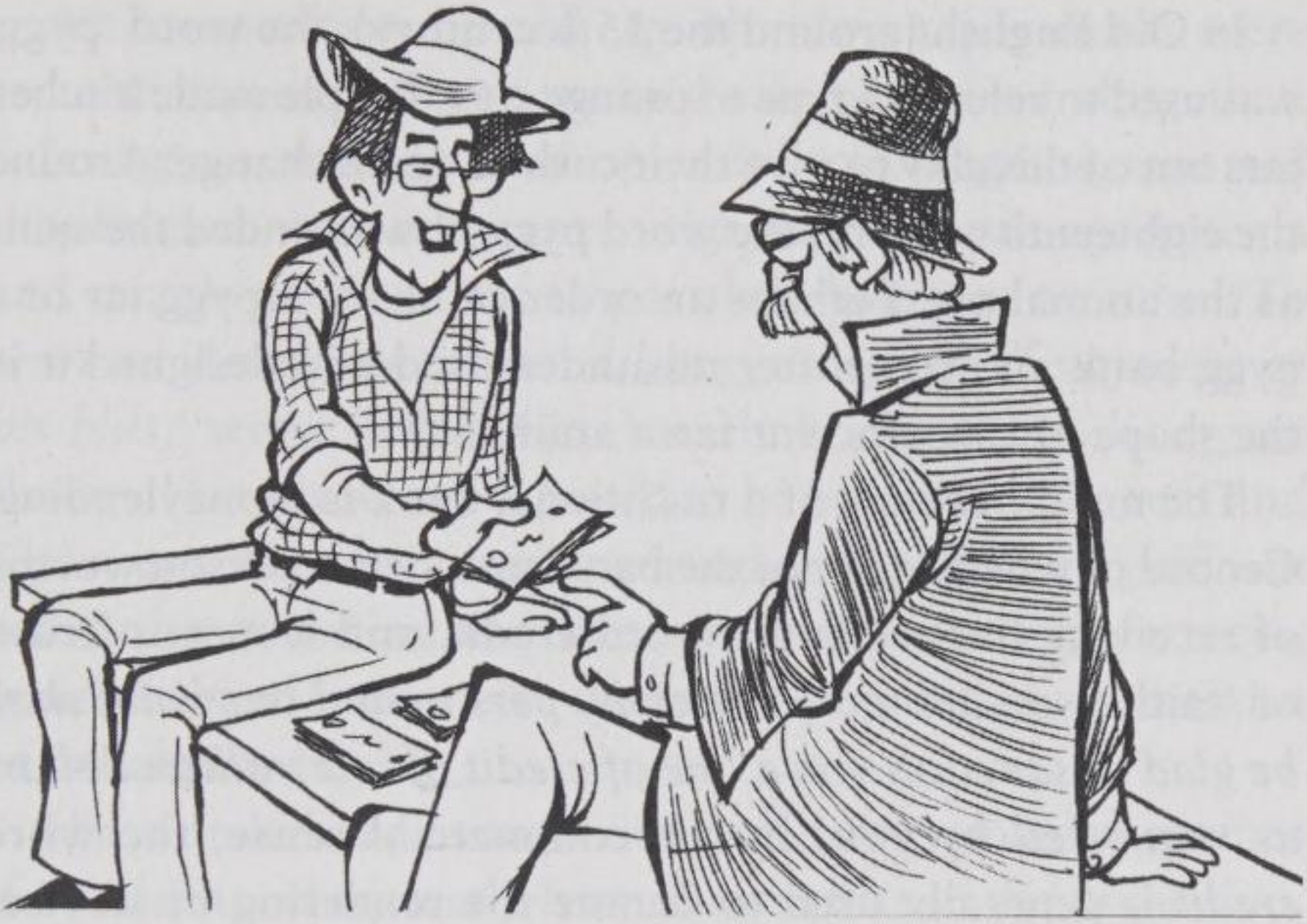
deterrent[28] to would-be-thieves. Later, in ancient Greece and during the Roman Empire, moneylenders added two significant innovations to expand the banking operations from their singular activity of money lending—accepting deposits and changing money.

The word **bank** comes from Old Italian *banca*—'table' or 'bench'. It is contemplated that in ancient Rome, moneylenders would set up their stalls in the middle of enclosed courtyards on a long bench. This bench was the moneylender's table where financial transactions were discussed, negotiated, and settled (not as much money lending as merely converting the foreign currency into the only legal tender in Rome from its imperial mint). Several other meanings of the word *bank* have been footnoted.[29] Invariably, a few of these moneylenders would also go out of business and lose all or a large part of the initial investment. Figuratively speaking, their 'bench' would get broken down and that gives us the word **bankrupt** (Latin *rupt*—'broken').

There are banks on the streets and there are banks at home, especially in homes with kids. The banks owned and managed by kids are called **piggy banks**. Usually, one finds piggy banks made in the shape of a 'pig', making me wonder

[28] **Deterrent** means something that deters or prevents. It also means something usually immaterial that interferes with or delays action or progress: *the horrific depiction of oral cancer on cigarette packets acts as a deterrent for smokers.*

[29] **Bank** also means to have confidence in, rely on; a piled-up mass, as of snow or clouds; a steep natural incline; an artificial embankment; the slope of land adjoining a body of water, especially adjoining a river, lake, or channel (often used in the plural); a large elevated area of a sea floor (often used in the plural); the cushion of a billiard or pool table; the lateral inward tilting, as of a motor vehicle or an aircraft, in turning or negotiating a curve.



how pigs of all animals, got associated with the apparatus for saving money. However, there are some piggy banks that are cylindrical or spherical in shape as well. I was confused and set out to discover the genesis of this weird association.

While researching on pig lifestyles and eating patterns, I found that pigs are pretty efficient at transforming food energy into body weight. If kept in small and crowded enclosures, without much freedom to move around and lose energy due to physical activity, they are able to convert as much as 33 per cent of what they eat directly into body weight.[30] Thus, I concluded that this attribute of efficient conservation of resources must have led to the home apparatus for small savings being named piggy banks. But, alas, my research and conclusion didn't turn out to be the real reason!

[30] The most efficient converter of feed into bodyweight is broiler chicken, which needs as little as 1.8 kg of feed to gain 1 kg of body weight.

In Old English (around the 15th century), the word 'pygg' was used to refer to a type of orange clay. People made kitchen jars out of this clay to save their cash or spare change. Around the eighteenth century, the word pygg now sounded the same as the animal pig. Perhaps an order came for a pygg jar or a pygg bank and the potter misunderstood and designed it in the shape of this efficient farm animal.☺

The main business of a traditional bank is moneylending. Central to whether or not the bank considers a person worthy of receiving finance is the word **credit**, and it means 'trust' or 'faith': *you are a creditworthy person and our bank shall be glad to sanction you a line of credit of one million dollars as requested by you.* In the commercial sense, the word *credit* is generally used to denote the rendering of services (including financial services like loans, bank guarantees, etc.) or delivering goods, on the 'trust' or 'faith' that the payment will be made after the goods and services have been received. While banks have historically extended credit to its creditworthy customers, it is interesting to note how corporate entities commenced extending credit. Believe it or not, this practice has its origins in farming.

Way back in the 1850s, while farmers were introduced to mechanized means of harvest, the trouble was that farm equipment like threshers, harvesters, and combined harvester–threshers (combines) were so expensive, a farmer could not afford to purchase these, even from all the profits from his crop sales. The solution of 'instalment credit' was provided by the J.I. Case Threshing Company that announced in 1848 that the price of a case thresher was 290 dollars on 100 per cent cash basis and 325 dollars on credit terms: 50 dollars of down payment, 75 dollars due 1 November, 100 dollars due 1 January, and balance 100 dollars due the following October.

As competition heated up, the down payments were reduced considerably to make a sale or waived altogether. Sales agents, who doubled up as collection agents, reported that farmers were reluctant to sign formal credit agreements and unable or unwilling to pay their balances on time. '*To term an American farmer dilatory in terms of payment of his bills*,' wrote one of Case's early bookkeepers, '*is arrant flattery*.' Losses were estimated to be between 3 per cent and 5 per cent. The farm implement industry played a significant role in introducing the late-nineteenth-century farmers, which formed bulk of the American population, to the idea of instalment buying.

I have underlined a couple of words that I wanted to confirm if I understood correctly from the context of the discussion. **Dilatory** means a tendency to delay or procrastinate, gain time, or defer decision. Dilate also means to enlarge, to expand, to distend, and to swell: *lungs get dilated upon inhalation; pupils of the eye get dilated if one tries to locate things in extremely low light*.

Arrant is an adjective intensifier that means thorough, downright, out-and-out, extreme, etc. For instance, one can say an arrant fool (instead of a thorough fool), arrant laziness, arrant coward, or an arrant thief. A word often confused with arrant is errant. **Errant** means deviating from the regular or proper course; straying: *under the influence of stardom, the errant youngster has completely stopped attending college*. It also means journeying or travelling and also something that is aimless or irregular in motion: *an errant traveller, an errant breeze*.

Around the same time as the American farmers were getting used to the ease of owning farm implements using the novel financing concept of instalment credit and revolutionizing

the agricultural industry by bringing more and more land under cultivation, the first *mortgage* bank, Frankfurter Hypothekenbank, opened its doors (in 1862 to be precise) in Frankfurt am Main in Germany (then Prussia). And it used the same concept of instalment credit to finance the housing construction and commercial properties in the briskly expanding towns and cities of Prussia during this era of rapid industrialization.

But before we jump into the good, the bad and the ugly aspects of housing finance, did you know that the floors of buildings are called '**stories**'[31] because early European builders used to paint picture stories on the sides of their houses. Each floor had a different story. A friend who recently bought a two-storied house, however, muses: 'I bought a two-storied house. One story before I bought and another after.'

I am sure that the pace of industrialization and urbanization received a very big boost with the advent of mortgage financing, especially since very few people have ever had enough savings or liquid funds to construct or purchase property outright—free of any **encumbrance.**[32] While I broadly understood the concept of mortgage financing—if someone takes a loan to buy a property, the same (or some other property) acts as a collateral until the loan has been fully repaid with applicable interest—I wasn't too sure I had the understanding and appreciation of the term 'mortgage'. When I checked, I was presented with the following:

[31] The spelling in British English is 'storey' (plural is 'storeys').

[32] **Encumbrance** means something that impedes, acts as a hindrance, or is burdensome: *poverty is a lifelong encumbrance*. It also means a dependent person, especially a child. In law, it signifies a burden or lender's claim on property, as in a mortgage loan, unless the loan has been fully repaid.

A **mortgage** is a 'conveyance' of interest in a property (commercial or residential) as security for the repayment of money borrowed.

This definition validated my understanding but didn't earn my full appreciation due to the presence of the word 'conveyance', a probable misfit or an error, I thought. Even if this word was only of mild interest to me, given the meagre amount of conveyance/transportation allowance that was allowed to us on a tax deductible basis under the income tax rules, I did check for its other possible meaning. **Conveyance**, besides its use to denote a means of transporting (especially a vehicle, as a bus, airplane, or automobile), also has a legal meaning. Conveyance means the transfer of the legal title to property from one person or an institution to another. Over time, conveyance has also come to refer to the instrument or document effecting such a transfer.

As I read further on mortgages, I came to know that borrowers generally **loathe**[33] defaulting on these loans and risking eviction from their homes if the lenders decide to repossess and **foreclose**[34] the properties. No wonder, most banks and financial institutions that extend mortgage loans, experience minimal defaults and delays in their mortgage loan portfolios and are able to extend these loans at extremely competitive rates and for very long tenures (up to thirty years).

[33] **Loathe** is to feel disgust or intense aversion for, to dislike (someone or something) greatly, to abhor, etc.: *I loathe people who spread malicious gossip*.

[34] **Foreclosure** is a process whereby a bank or any other financial institution repossesses the immovable property after the owner/borrower fails to repay the mortgage loan as per the agreed terms and conditions. The lender usually sells this property and uses the proceeds to retire the outstanding loan and the associated legal expenses.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the word mortgage (from Old French mort—'dead' and gage—'pledge') itself signifies this strong repayment commitment of the borrowers as they treat it as a 'death pledge', a repayment commitment to be honoured even after their death. (If you think no one cares whether you are alive or dead, miss a couple of mortgage payments.) ☺

Another reason for the generally well performing mortgage portfolios, I gathered, is that mortgage lenders have, over time, developed a strong underwriting discipline and can effectively minimize risky lending decisions. This is done, **inter alia**,[35] by a thorough check on the credit history of the borrower, capping the loan amount to a certain multiple of the annual disposable family income of the borrower, insistence on borrower contributing his or her personal savings in the purchase of the property (usually between 10 per cent to 30 per cent of the property value, hence limiting the loan to between 90 per cent to 70 per cent of the property value), etc.

As I read this, I was convinced that the author wrote this article on mortgages much before the US sub-prime crisis. There was a time when the dream of the older generation was to pay off a mortgage and legitimately call themselves homeowners. The dream of today's young families is to get one. ☺

During the US sub-prime crisis, its mortgage industry suddenly threw away this underwriting discipline and all

[35] **Inter alia** is Latin for 'among other things': *increasing incidence of childhood obesity and hypertension is an outcome of, inter alia, shrinking open spaces in cities, advent of round-the-clock TV programming for kids, popularity of ready-to-eat and junk food in their diets.*

the wisdom acquired and honed over decades. The flavour of the sub-prime season was a NINJA borrower (No Income, No Jobs and Assets) and suddenly, the jobless and destitute found themselves being hotly pursued and, in no time, were pretty owners of multiple homes. As these properties appreciated, they became paper millionaires. To spend their millions, they took incremental loans on the appreciated amount and went **bingeing**[36] on designer stuff and **gallivanting**[37] to exotic locales.

Reverting to the concept of underwriting discipline or lack of it, this financial term merits an understanding as it is used fairly commonly in financial parlance. **Underwriting** literally means to write under or at the foot of, especially under other written matter. Usually, one would do that to subscribe to some publication, to show agreement or to support a statement, a decision or a cause. In the last 100 years or so, usage of the word has expanded to include assuming financial responsibility and thus liability for losses under pre-agreed conditions, for instance, losses under insurance contracts.

In the context of mortgage lending, the underwriting specialists, by evaluating all financial and other parameters, determine if the risk of offering a mortgage loan to a particular borrower is acceptable. Their approval is an explicit agreement and support to extend the loan and

[36] **Bingeing** is a period or bout, usually brief, of unrestrained, immoderate self-indulgence. It is also a period of excessive or uncontrolled indulgence in food or drink: *people usually binge during the weekends and spend the weekdays offloading it.*

[37] **Gallivant** means to roam about in search of pleasure or amusement. It also means to play around amorously; flirt: *we went gallivanting in New Zealand and it was the experience of a lifetime.*

implicitly shows a high degree of comfort for its timely repayment. In the area of banking and finance, underwriting means to guarantee the success of a public issue or private placement of stocks and bonds. Should, for any reason, the stocks or bonds are not fully sold in the market, the underwriter undertakes to buy the unsold part at a price fixed upfront.

Coming back to the etymology of the word mortgage, the root 'mort', I discovered, is also the source of the English words mortal, **mortify**[38] and amortize, a word very closely associated with the repayment or liquidation of a mortgage or a debt by instalment payments. **Amortize** comes from Latin *ad*—'to' and *mort*—'dead' and literally means to reduce (debt or a mortgage) to the point of death (by periodic repayments). Amortize, in the context of a wasting or a depreciating asset (say machinery), also means to write off this asset by annual transfers to a sinking fund. This is usually done with the objective of creating a suitable fund to replace this asset once it has outlived its useful life. Besides, government encourages this kind of financial discipline by providing tax breaks on contributions to such funds from pre-tax profits.

The concept of instalment credit that took birth in the agriculture implements industry in 1850s was successfully **internalized**[39] by American automobile manufacturers half

[38] **Mortify** means to experience humiliation or shame, as by injury to one's pride or self-respect. It also means to discipline (one's body, physical appetite, passion etc.) by abstinence, self-inflicted suffering or ascetic discipline: *he mortified his flesh, by sleeping (in bitter cold) without a quilt and with open windows, to cleanse his soul.*

[39] **Internalize** is to incorporate, to make internal, to make a part of one's own pattern of thinking, the prevailing cultural values, attitudes,

a century later.[40] It tremendously eased the availability of credit to American households and precipitated an automobile revolution in the country. Back in my school days, I had developed this habit of reading the sometimes funny, sometimes solemn messages written behind commercial vehicles we would overtake during our family road trips. Invariably, the only message that I found rather **abstruse**[41] was the declaration on the number plate of the vehicle that it was 'hypothecated to XYZ bank'.

My dad, a banker himself, gladly offered to help demystify this obscure phraseology. To **hypothecate** is to pledge the property (in this case, the commercial vehicles) as security for the loan availed to purchase the property. You may wonder that this is exactly the same as the concept of mortgage; however, there is a fine difference. In mortgage, the title documents of the property are in the physical possession of the lender, while in case of hypothecation, these documents stay with the borrower, but with a notation of hypothecation on the face of these documents. The notation serves to prevent the sale of the underlying property without prior approval of the lender and retirement of the underlying loan.

Another contribution of the concept of instalment credit was in the revolution brought about in consumerism and

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ideas, norms and motives of another person or a group of people: *most employees internalize the attitudes, mannerisms and even dressing sense of the star performers without realizing it.*

[40] Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2012)

[41] **Abstruse** means hard to understand, complex: *the attendance at the auditorium pleasantly surprised us, as we thought the subject of the lecture was rather abstruse.*

personal spending through the introduction of credit cards. To use the precise banking parlance, the first credit cards were actually issued as **charge cards**, wherein spends on the card in a particular period (usually thirty days) were payable in 'full' by a defined due date (usually every thirty days) or be subject to severe late fees and restrictions on card use. A **credit card** is slightly different in the sense that it offers a revolving credit which does not need to be repaid in full on the payment due date. As long as the minimum payment amount (usually between 2 per cent to 5 per cent of the outstanding amount) is settled, the balance is carried forward as a loan charging interest.

Charge cards became popular in the early 20th century. With the invention and growing popularity of automobiles and airplanes, travel demands (hotels, gas stations, etc.) started increasing rapidly and people also discovered the option to travel to a variety of stores for their shopping needs. In an effort to capture customer loyalty, hotel chains, gas stations, and departmental stores started offering charge accounts for their customers, which could be accessed by a card (hence the term 'charge card'). Unfortunately, people needed to bring dozens of these cards with them if they went out shopping or travelling which was rather inconvenient.

Interestingly, some smart folks saw a business opportunity in this new development. In 1949, one particular person started lending his charge cards to his poor neighbours who needed items in an emergency. For this service, the man required his neighbours to pay him back the cost of the purchase plus some extra money. Unfortunately for the man, many of his neighbours were unable to pay him back within a short period, and he was then forced to borrow

money from Hamilton Credit Corporation to regularize his own charge cards. When he was not able to repay Hamilton Credit Corporation, Frank X. McNamara, head of Hamilton Credit Corporation, went out to meet Alfred Bloomingdale, his long-time friend and grandson of the founder of Bloomingdale's, and Ralph Sneider, his own attorney, to discuss this problem customer.

The three men sat down to eat at Major's Cabin Grill, a famous New York restaurant located next to the Empire State Building. At the end of the meal with his two friends, McNamara reached into his pocket for his wallet so that he could pay for the meal (in cash). He was shocked to discover that he had forgotten his wallet at home. To his embarrassment, he then had to call his wife and have her bring him some money. McNamara vowed never to let this happen again and came up with the idea of a charge card that could be used at multiple locations.

The three friends pooled some money and started a new company in 1950 that they called, what else, but Diners Club. The first Diners Club cards were given out in 1950 to 200 people (most were friends and acquaintances of McNamara) and accepted in fourteen restaurants in New York. True to its name, this company focused its sales efforts on the salesmen, since salesmen often needed to dine at multiple restaurants to entertain their clients.

In the beginning, progress was difficult. Merchants didn't want to pay the Diners Club's fee (7 per cent of the sales value) and didn't want competition for their own store cards, while customers didn't want to sign up unless there were a large number of merchants that accepted the card. However, the concept of the card continued to grow and by the end of 1950, as many as 20,000 people were using the Diners

Club card.[42] Fast forward to 2010 and in a short span of sixty years, the number of credit cards (including American Express, Discover, MasterCard, Visa) has swelled to over 600 million, with a mind-boggling spend of over 1.5 trillion dollars for 2010 and these are only US figures!

[42] http://history1900s.about.com/od/1950s/a/firstcreditcard.htm, last accessed on 12 September 2012

8

TUMMY TUCK

I am with my colleague and dear friend Malcolm. We are enjoying the experience of fine dining at the MCA Club in Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai's new business centre. As usual, I am grabbing the lion's share of the conversation, and his responses are monosyllabic, for he has already grabbed the lion's share of servings and is busy doing justice to his appetite. In between **dollops**[1] of butter chicken, he tells me he has finally made up his mind to get back into shape.

This is nothing new and I am not amused. Rarely would there be another individual on this earth, who would have tried such an amazing array of slimming treatments. This time, he has opted for what is aptly called a tummy tuck—more correctly, an abdominoplasty. I wonder how long the effect of this treatment can last on a person who is obsessed with eating and drinking, especially rich cuisines like Mughlai and Italian, especially when it is compounded

[1] **Dollop** is (1) a soft mass or blob or lump of some substance: *the kid likes his brownie with a dollop of ice-cream*; (2) a small quantity; a dash of liquid: *a dollop of lemon juice enhanced the flavour of my drink;* and (3) a large serving, especially of food.

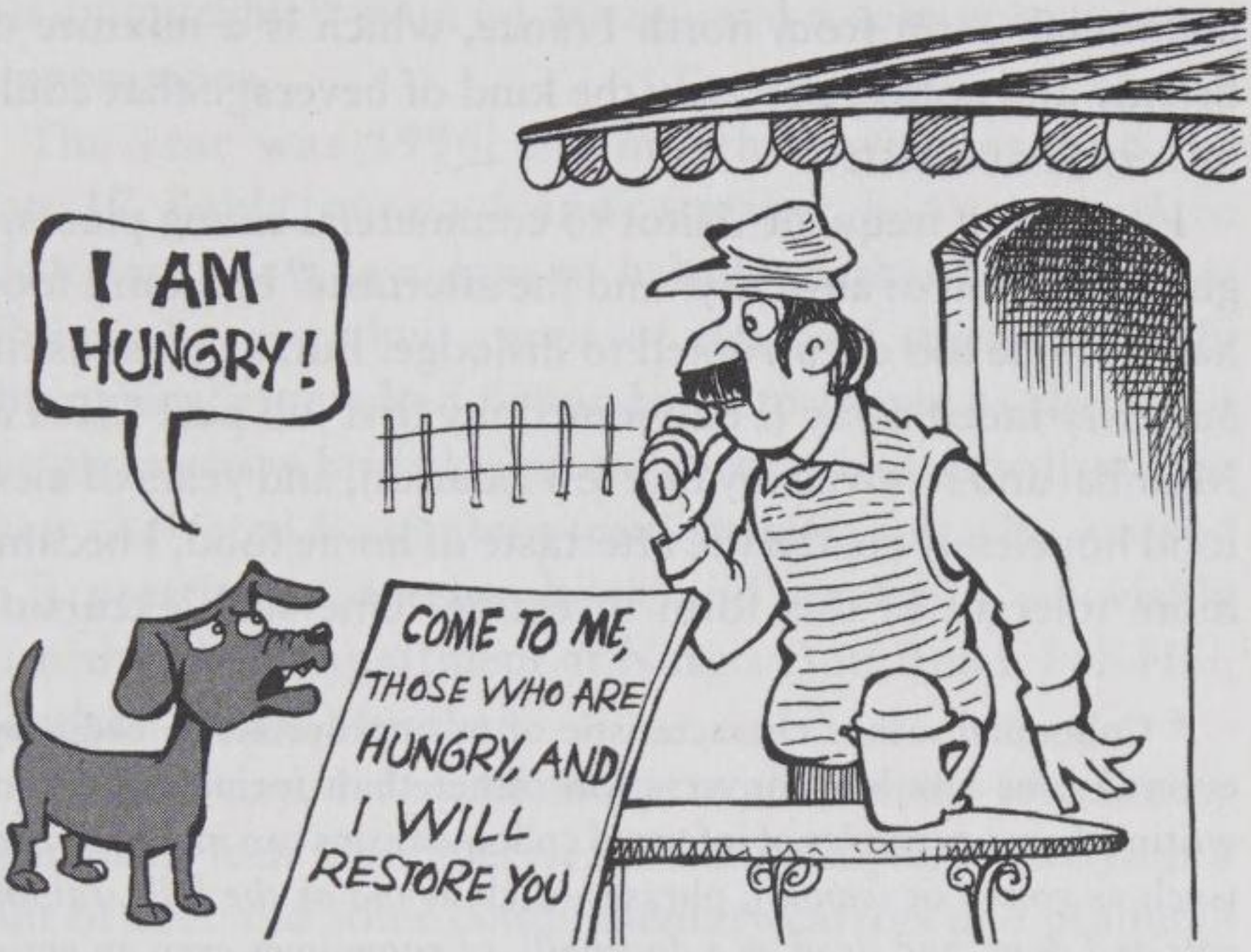
by his **anathema**[2] for anything that involves physical exercise.

Eating out and drinking is no more a luxury affordable by a few. It is a part of the everyday life of commoners and restaurants are a dime a dozen. That was not always the case though.

Until the early 18th century, eating places were always a part of a hotel, tavern, or inn. As per the Guinness Book of World Records, Sobrino de Botin in Madrid, a restaurant that opened in 1725, is the oldest restaurant in existence. However, the word 'restaurant' was first used in connection with a stand-alone, public dining establishment opened around 1765 or 1766 in Paris by a chef named Boulanger.[3] His main offering was a soup made from sheep hooves, which he claimed had restorative properties. Boulanger didn't call this establishment anything. He couldn't. There wasn't a word to describe a place like that! He just placed a signboard in the front that bore an adaptation of a famous quote by St. Matthew in Latin: *Venite ad me omnes qui stomach laboratis et ego vos restauro* (Come to me, those who are hungry, and I will restore you). From the word restore—restaurerai in French—the English derived restaurant.

[2] **Anathema** refers to a person or thing that is detested or loathed: *his anathema for anything bordering on fundamentalism.*

[3] Some people believe that Boulanger may not have been his name, but his profession, since **boulanger** means baker. Incidentally, the word **boulangerie** refers to a bakery shop, specifically one that specializes in breads, rolls, etc. It is also said that back in those days, if you were to own a shop or were a street vendor, you had to belong to a guild (e.g. breadmaker's guild, pastry guild, winemaker's guild, etc.). Boulanger wanted his shop, but he couldn't afford the dues that were openly demanded by guilds. However, there was no soupmaker's guild, which explains why the main offering in his restaurant was soup.



Did you know that Paris, which gave restaurants to the world, also gets credit for introducing the word **bistro** to the English language? Bistro is a familiar name for a cafe serving moderately priced, simple meals in an **unpretentious**[4] setting. The word apparently stems from the Russian быстро (bystro), which means 'hurry'. Russian soldiers occupying France after the Napoleonic Wars, would frequently demand that French civilians serve them food quickly, shouting the word at them that evolved into the neologism 'bistro'. This 'Russian' etymology is disputed though.[5] Another possible source for the word is *bistouille* or *bistrouille*, a

[4] **Unpretentious** means lacking pretension or affectation: *her quiet unpretentious demeanour*. It also means not ostentatious, modest, exhibiting restrained good taste: *the room is pleasant and unpretentious*. The term **understated** is its popular synonym.

[5] http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bistro, last accessed on 12 September 2012

colloquial[6] term from north France, which is a mixture of brandy and coffee, precisely the kind of beverage that could be served at a bistro.[7]

I was not a frequent visitor to commercial eating places. I guess the habit of **austerity**[8] and the **aftertaste**[9] of mom's food had become too deep-rooted to dislodge. But, as reasons for austerity faded away (I had joined my first job post MBA at Mumbai and received my first few salaries), and years of mess food hopelessly coated the aftertaste of home food, I became more tolerant of this form of eating. One such excursion

[6] **Colloquial** means characteristic of or appropriate to ordinary, everyday, or familiar conversation rather than formal speech or writing. Some examples of informal colloquialisms can include words (such as *gonna* or *wanna*), phrases (such as *old as the hills*, *raining cats and dogs*, and *dead as a doornail*), or sometimes even an entire aphorism *(there's more than one way to skin a cat)*. Words that have a formal meaning might also have a colloquial meaning. The word *kid* can mean *young goat* in formal usage and *child* in colloquial usage. Colloquial is often mistakenly used with a connotation of disapproval, as if it meant vulgar, bad, or incorrect usage, whereas it is merely an easy and informal style of speaking and writing, without strict adherence to set forms.

[7] http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=1005121303638, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

[8] **Austerity** is the quality of being stern or severe in attitude *(an austere schoolmaster)*; grave or serious *(an austere expression)*; self-disciplined, not indulging in pleasures *(austerities of monastery life)*; severely simple *(an austere design)*; and very frugal *(an austere life with few luxuries)*.

[9] **Aftertaste** (in cookery) means a taste that lingers on after eating or drinking even when the substance that caused it is no longer present in the mouth. It also means a feeling that remains after an event or experience, especially one that was unpleasant: *the protracted court battle for the custody of the young kids left the couple with a bitter aftertaste*.

left an **indelible**[10] stain on my ego and a deep groove in my hippocampus.

The year was 1996, the month November, and the date 17. Bablu, our cook and caretaker, had gone back to his village for a few days to help his father and younger siblings harvest their crops of rice and sugarcane. My **chummery**[11] mate had flown down to Jaipur to check out the prospective bride his proud parents had shortlisted for their chartered accountant (rank holder) son who worked in a prestigious foreign bank and stayed in a lavishly furnished bank apartment at Nargis Dutt Road, Pali Hill, Bandra (West), Mumbai.

So, that day, I was all alone in this lavish and breezy apartment (our chummery), sustaining myself merely on a pint of beer and some complimentary carrots and peanuts I had consumed during Saturday night's outing with friends. I had woken up leisurely by Sunday afternoon, despite my morning alarm repeatedly straining its vocal cords to remind me, yet again, of my resolve to get up at 6 a.m. and proceed to Jogger's Park for a brisk walk.

The restaurants nearby were upmarket and naturally very expensive for a young management associate to enjoy a hearty meal at. I walked some distance to avoid paying the premium for proximity to this celebrity location. It

[10] **Indelible** means marks that cannot be erased, removed, or the like: *indelible ink*. It also means something that cannot be eliminated, forgotten or changed: *the indelible memories of war*; *the indelible influence of a great teacher*.

[11] **Chummery** means living quarters shared by bachelors. It originally referred to the building in which unmarried British army officers were quartered in India during the British Raj.

was in the neighbourhood suburb of Khar that I chanced to spot a busy eatery, the kind hard-working, middle-class families and young urban professionals like me **patronize.**[12] A waiter quickly **dished out**[13] a dog-eared menu card and asked me if I wanted a bottle of Bisleri or a glass of Aqua Guard water.

If he had used these brand names generically, I feared that in one stroke, he had watered down the **humongous**[14] branding efforts and marketing spends of the manufactures of Bisleri brand of bottled water and Aqua Guard brand of water filters. My fear was partly crystallized when he actually served me a bottle of Bislery, a local imitation, in the name of Bisleri. (Note the spelling difference carefully in case you are wondering why I called it an imitation.) Since my memories of a branding case study on 'How Xerox became a generic name for photocopying' were still fresh in my mind, I could not contain myself and sought directions to their famed water filter. Thankfully, it was indeed Aqua Guard.

Relaxed, I flipped through the menu card and my eyes fell on a novel dish, which came with a qualification. This dish had a complex French sounding name—à la carte—and

[12] **Patronize** is to support an artist or an institution; also to visit a store, restaurant, hotel, etc. regularly. It also means to behave in a condescending manner (where you try to descend to the level of someone you consider inferior, especially in terms of intellect): *the writer patronized his reader by writing in a language they found easy to understand.*

[13] **Dish out** (informal) is a phrase that means to serve (food) from a serving dish, pot, etc. It also means to deal out; distribute: *she dished out the annual increment letters in the Monday morning meeting.*

[14] **Humongous** means extraordinarily large; enormous. It is a slang word, an Americanism from the 1960s and 1965–70, and coined perhaps by blending huge and monstrous.

the qualification was that the restaurant would take thirty minutes to serve it. Being new to the ways and customs of Mumbai, I was rather amused to find a French dish being served in a restaurant that displayed only Indian and Indian Chinese options in its menu card.

Ever keen to sample different cuisines, I **hollered,**[15] 'Waiter! One plate of à la carte!' The waiter **rattled**[16] off the specialities that his restaurant offered but claimed never to have heard of à la carte! I pointed to this French dish in the menu but he still could not fathom what I wanted. I figured that it stemmed from his lack of ability to read English.

Exasperated[17] and hungry, I finally summoned his manager. A very young and smartly dressed fellow came up to me, with **servility**[18] oozing from his **demeanour**[19] and every

[15] **Holler** is to shout or yell: *he hollered his choicest curses at the motorcyclist who scratched his brand new car.*

[16] **Rattle** means (1) to make a quick series of short percussive sounds: *I could hear the rattle of dishes, as they were washed in the kitchen, in the bedroom*; (2) to move with such sounds: *a train rattled along the track*; (3) to talk rapidly and at length, usually without much thought: *she rattled on about inconsequential events*; (4) to utter or perform rapidly or effortlessly: *she rattled off poetry for an hour without a pause*; and (5) (informal) to fluster; unnerve: *the scene of the accident rattled me.* Hope you now know why a rattlesnake is named so, and why a baby's toy is called a rattle.

[17] **Exasperation** means provocation, irritation, or extreme annoyance: *her exasperation at being repeatedly interrupted was understandable.*

[18] **Servility** means slave-like submissiveness. It also means of or pertaining to slaves or servants or to a condition of servitude or property ownership in which a person is held as a slave or as partially enslaved: *medieval rebellions against servile laws.*

[19] **Demeanour** means conduct, behaviour, deportment, facial appearance, or the way a person behaves toward other people: *his demeanour could tell a lot about his upbringing.*

pore. I took it upon myself to **pontificate**[20] on the quality of waiters and questioned their **raison d'être**[21] if they were not conversant with what the restaurant offered and were unable even to read the name of a dish in English. Alas! That was to be my **undoing**.[22]

I felt like a fool when the young manager (possibly, even younger than me) patronizingly explained to me that **à la carte** is not the name of any French dish but a meal ordered as separate items from a menu that offered an **eclectic**[23] spread. I could pick up any or many from an array of dishes, and say: Pearls au Lait, Gherkins, Lobster Newburg, Asparagus Tips Parmesan, Delmonico Steak, Eggs Benedict, Waldorf Salad, Peach Melba, Canard á la Rouennaise, and so on and that would be an à la carte order.

Later, I was to discover that a meal consisting of a limited range of dishes served at a fixed all-inclusive price is called **table d'hôte**. The fixed meal usually does not have many dishes on offer, unlike a **buffet**, which also has a fixed price but still offers a wide range of food and guests often eat standing up. Buffet has linguistic company in **smorgasbord**, a Swedish word to refer to a buffet meal featuring a varied

[20] **Pontificate** is to speak or express judgements or opinions in a pompous or dogmatic manner: *instead of pontificating on others' inefficiency, let us focus on getting things done.*

[21] **Raison d'être** is French for reason or justification for existence: *theatre was the artist's raison d'être.*

[22] **Undoing** means (1) the reversing of what has been done: *you cannot undo certain mistakes*; (2) destruction, ruin, or disaster: *greed was his undoing*; and (3) the act of unfastening or loosing: *she began undoing her hair to wash it.*

[23] **Eclectic** means made up by combining elements chosen from various sources; *the buffet was an eclectic spread of dishes from various international cuisines.*

number of dishes (hot and cold **hors d'oeuvres,**[24] salads, casseroles, meats, cheeses). It also means an extensive array or variety, a varied collection: *the company has a smorgasbord of employee benefits.*

The young manager of the restaurant where I had made a fool of myself with the term à la carte had, in his explanation, mentioned some obscure sounding dishes. In one quick glance at the menu card, I could not locate even one of these names on it. I assumed—without **confronting**[25]

[24] **Hors d'oeuvre** are small bits of appetizing food—spicy meat, fish, cheese, or a preparation of chopped or creamed foods, often served on crackers or small pieces of toast, to conveniently eat at parties and usually served with cocktails.

[25] **Confront** means (1) to oppose with hostility or defiance: *the feuding factions confronted each other;* (2) to present for acknowledgement or contradiction usually face to face: *they confronted him with evidence of his crime*; (3) to stand or come in

and risking another **humiliating**[26] encounter—that he had memorized these for his recent hotel management viva finals. Hence, they were fresh in his mind but not refreshed on the menu card.

I finally settled for the safe and evergreen option of creamy black lentils and cottage cheese in butter and cashew gravy. In ordering breads, however, I wanted to order the type they made best. I asked the waiter for his recommendation and he proudly announced that they prepared everything to perfection, whether it was **rumali roti,**[27] **lachha parantha,**[28] **tandoori roti,**[29] butter **naan,**[30] or twenty other variants. Sensing that I had trouble deciding and not wanting to waste

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front of or meet facing each other: *the two long-separated brothers confronted each other speechlessly*; and (4) to be in one's way: *the numerous obstacles that still confronted him.*

[26] **Humiliate** means to cause someone a painful loss of pride, self-respect, or dignity: *to suffer a 6-0, 6-0 washout was bad enough; to experience it in front of his home crowd was extremely humiliating.*

[27] **Rumali roti** is a thin bread from the northern part of India and Pakistan and a traditional element in Mughlai cuisine. The word *rumal* means handkerchief in Urdu and Hindi. The bread is extremely thin and supple, and the fact that it is usually served folded like a handkerchief, are the probable sources of the name.

[28] **Lachha parantha:** A *parantha* (also spelled *paratha* or *parauntha*) is a flatbread from the northern part of India and Pakistan. It is usually fried in oil or *ghee* and prepared with or without stuffing of grated vegetables. Parantha is an amalgamation of the words *parat* and *atta*, which literally means 'layers' of 'dough'. Lachha parantha is a variant that has multiple layers coated with ghee.

[29] **Tandoori roti** is a flat, unleavened bread prepared in a cylindrical clay oven (*tandoor*) fired by charcoal or wood.

[30] **Naan** is a flat, leavened, often tear-shaped bread of northwest India, made of white flour and baked in a *tandoor*.

any more of his time waiting for me to make up my mind, he offered to bring for me a basket of **assorted**[31] breads. Ironically, the same waiter whose knowledge about dishes on offer I had doubted, helped me understand the word assorted, when he brought me a basket full of a variety of breads. I later discovered that the obscure sounding dishes rattled off by the young manager are a gourmet's delight. A **gourmet** is a person who enjoys and is also an expert in the choice of fine food and good wine, usually drawn from various international cuisines.

A word very often confused with gourmet is gourmand. There is no doubting that a **gourmand** is a lover of food, it is just that he is more delighted by the quantity of it and hence usually consumes in excess. He is also indiscriminating, that is, he does not really bother whether the cuisine is French or Italian or Chinese or even whether it is of the finest quality or not. But consumption of food in excess is not merely out of love for food, sometimes it is an outcome of a medical condition called **hyperphagia** (also called **hyperorexia**), a disorder frequently associated with injury to the hypothalamus region of the brain and as a result of which people suffer from an abnormally increased appetite and hence constantly feel hungry.

A gourmet, if he could afford it, would like his meals to be lavish and well presented. This kind of meal is defined by the word **sumptuous.** Sumptuous can also be anything else, besides food, that entails a large spend, such as a sumptuous residence.[32] Interestingly, there is another word

[31] **Assortment** is a collection of various kinds of things; a mixed collection: *a great assortment of cars was on display.*

[32] I had not seen *sumptuous* being used in a sense other than for food and hence was slightly sceptical of a '*sumptuous residence*'. Not so long

that sounds similar to sumptuous, but means quite the opposite: to employ measures to regulate, control, or restrict personal expenditure. This interesting word is **sumptuary**. One can have sumptuary laws discouraging construction of large houses on small plots of land. Sumptuary also means the measures intended to regulate personal habits on moral or religious grounds: *sumptuary laws forbidding gambling*.[33]

At times, gourmands, because of food intake coupled with **sedentary**[34] lifestyles, become excessively fat. English has a specific word to define this lot and that is **corpulent**: *Mrs Makhen was somewhat corpulent but displayed tremendous stamina on the dance floor*. Imagine being poor but nonetheless being able to afford large quantities of rich food. That is highly improbable and hence most *corpulent* folks that I have come across are quite well off financially. English has a rhyming word **opulent** to describe a person who possesses or exhibits great wealth. Opulent also means abundant or luxuriant: *Mehta's opulence was evident in the*

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ago, in the 6 February 2012 issue of *The Times of India*, Mumbai, my eyes fell on a full-page advertisement of Sofitel, a newly inaugurated hotel at Mumbai and located next to my office at BKC that invited guests to its '302 sumptuous rooms and 6 innovative dining options'. Since then, I am at peace and hope to spoil myself someday with a sumptuous meal in one of these sumptuous suites.

[33] This interesting discussion on similar sounding words but with contrasted meanings reminds me of another interesting pair of English words where the two words have the same spelling except for the addition of one letter to one of the words, an addition that makes the meanings complete opposites—fasted and feasted.

[34] **Sedentary** means inclined to rest or sit a great deal: *after his retirement, he started leading a sedentary life.*

lavish arrangements for their daughter's wedding. Some of these *opulent* folks, who are *corpulent*, also suffer frequent bouts of audible and thus embarrassing gaseous emissions, and this condition is described by yet another rhyming word, **flatulent**: *his sedentary lifestyle coupled with his fondness for rich food made him suffer from frequent bouts of flatulence*. Here is a quick mnemonic to learn these three words in a simple rhyme:

'The **opulent corpulent** are frequently **flatulent**.'

On flatulence, I recollect a limerick apparently coined by US President Woodrow Wilson:

I sat next to the Duchess at tea
She was just as a Duchess should be
But her gases abdominal
Were simply phenomenal
And everyone thought it was me!

A **limerick** is a humorous verse of five lines, in which the first, second and fifth lines rhyme, and the third and the fourth lines, which are shorter, form a rhymed couplet.

I recollect a couple of words (*haunch* and *hunch*) that were perennially confusing until I learned these words through a rhyme. **Haunch** is the expansion of the body at and near the pelvis, the fleshy part of the body containing hip, buttock, and upper thigh. When a person is sitting on his *haunches*, he is sitting with body weight supported only on the feet and knees. **Hunch** means a guess, an intuition, a gut feeling. Now let us embed the meanings of these words in our minds by loudly repeating them in a rhyme;

The man with a ***paunch,***[35] *sitting on his haunch*[36]
As per my hunch, is one of the bunch
Who robbed Mr Gates of his lunch
and . . . also his chocolates!

Chocolates! The very mention of the word makes the mouth water. You can share them with your sweetheart or eat them all by yourself. But did you ever wonder why chocolates seem to fit the bill in any situation, romantic or **remorseful?**[37] No, it has nothing to do with the advertising that in any case promotes them as a gift for people you love.

It actually has a scientific basis and exploits the fact that a chemical, phenylethylamine, found in the human brain, acts as a mood enhancer when someone is in love. By a strange coincidence, the same chemical is also found in chocolates. This explains the craving for chocolates in good times. Again, during any negativity or depression, the concentration of this chemical dips in the brain, perhaps explaining craving for chocolate during heartbreak. Either way chocolates have their say.

From chocolates, let us jump to fruits and vegetables. Let me admit that I did not expect any great lessons in English with their aid. The findings surprised me. I gathered from www.takeourword.com/Issue023.html, and I am tempted to quote verbatim, that 'The Latin word *granum*—"a grain"—has

[35] **Paunch** is a large belly or a potbelly that sticks out.

[36] This word is always used in plural (haunches) in non-medical conversations or writings. I have taken the liberty to use it as a singular word purely out of my desire to create a rhyme.

[37] **Remorseful** means sorry, apologetic, full of regret, and repentance: *after slapping the child, he was filled with remorse.*

been remarkably generous in its contribution to the English language, being the **progenitor**[38] of many disparate words such as garner, garnet, grain, granary, grange, granite, grenade, filigree and pomegranate.'

Granite is a rock with a *granular* composition while **garnet** was originally an adjective meaning the deep red found in the heart of a pomegranate, only later coming to mean the semi-precious stone. **Garner** and **grange** originally meant the same thing, a granary, from Latin *granarium*—'a shed or barn for storing grain'. Garner is, now, heard only as a verb and means to gather or hoard, to amass, acquire, or earn: *he gradually garnered enough support to stand for the college election*. **Filigree** is jewellery made with very fine wires (Latin *filum*—'thread') and *grains* of gold or silver.

Pomegranate was *pomum granatum* (literally an *apple* with *grains/seeds*) for the Romans and *pome grenate* for the French, and finally pomegranate to the English. The French evolved a new word **grenade** from the second element in this word, a rather apt name for a shell full of explosive grains.

The humble radish was instrumental in indelibly fixing the word *radical* in my mind. Radish comes from Latin *radix*—'root' and is simply an edible root. The same root, as I discovered to my amazement, helped to form the word *radical*. Simply put, a **radical** is a person who likes to go to the 'root' of the matter. Around the end of the 18th century, a group of English politicians were beginning to be known

[38] **Progenitor** means a biologically related ancestor; an originator or founder of a future development; predecessor; precursor: *Palladium mambo and cha-cha are regarded as the progenitors of salsa, a Latin dance form.*

as radical reformers, because they wanted to go to the root of the issue and revamp the existing political set-up.[39]

Similarly, I was surprised to learn that *apricot* and *precocious* have a common root. Apricot comes from the sixteenth century *apricock*, further from Arabic *al-birquq*. It is related to the Latin *praecox*—'early ripening', an apt description of the low shelf life of this delicate fruit. It was interesting to discover that we get precocious from the same Latin root, as the mental and other faculties of precocious children ripen earlier than usual. **Precocious** is someone who is unusually advanced and hence ahead of peers in development and intelligence: *Srinivasa Ramanujan was a*

[39] Wilfred Funk, *Word Origins and Their Romantic Stories*, (W. R. Goyal Publishers & Distributors, Delhi, 2001), p. 211

precocious child, which was evident from his mastery of complex mathematical theorems at a very young age.

Let me share with you an interesting tidbit. The chefs at McDonald's undergo a ten-day training at Elk Grove village in Illinois. The degree awarded at the end of this training programme is called *Hamburgerology* with a minor in *French Fries*.

Hamburger, as a term, looked rather simple to decipher. I had assumed it to be a combination of 'ham' and 'burger'. To my surprise, I figured out that hamburger, coined in the US in the late 19th century, has nothing to do with ham! It was named after the Hamburg steak, a spiced minced *beef* dish made in the German city of Hamburg. German immigrants introduced the recipe to the US where, by the turn of the century, 'Hamburger steak' got simplified to 'hamburger'. In our lazy way, we now often call it merely a burger. We even have a 'cheeseburger', which is somewhat illogical, as there is no city called Cheeseburg![40]

Incidentally, French fries do not owe their origin to France. They are so named since the style of cutting the potatoes into long 'fingers' is called 'frenching' and hence these are fried potatoes that are frenched before frying! Interestingly, British call them 'chips' (fish and chips is a favourite snack there). Interestingly, some people in the US say 'Freedom fries' as a political **euphemism**[41] for French fries. This is a result of anti-

[40] According to an article by David Wroe in *The Age* (Melbourne) on 29 June 2000, the hamburger's history goes back beyond the city of Hamburg. It is claimed that Turks and Mongolians, the people of old Tartary, put pieces of steak under the saddles on their horses. By the end of a day's riding, the steak was well pulverized. The practice is said to have spread to Latvia and Estonia. From there, the primitive steak tartare was taken to Germany, and that is where Hamburg eventually came into the picture. You can download the article at http://home.alphalink.com.au/~umbidas/food_and_drink_2.htm

[41] This word has been explained later in the chapter titled 'Coffee and Conversations'.

French sentiment during the controversy over the US decision to launch the 2003 invasion of Iraq. France expressed strong opposition in the United Nations to such an invasion. Some frowned upon the French position, leading to campaigns to boycott French goods and remove its name from products.

Let us explore another hot favourite of the current generation. During the Iraq War, as a soldier was saying goodbye to his family, his five-year-old son James held his leg and started pleading with him not to leave. 'No Daddy, please don't go!' he kept repeating. He was beginning to make a scene when James' wife, desperate to calm her son, said: 'Let Daddy go, I'll take you to Pizza Hut.' Immediately James loosened his death grip and said in a calm voice, 'Bye Daddy!'[42]

The common belief is that Italians invented the **pizza** but its origin goes back to ancient times in the Middle East. Babylonians, Israelites, Egyptians, Armenians, Greeks, Romans, and other ancient cultures ate flat, **unleavened**[43] bread cooked in mud ovens. The Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians ate bread topped with olive oil and native spices (now called **focaccia**). But Italy's version of the dish, especially from Naples, is the one we are familiar with—with tomato, cheese, and other toppings and seasonings.

Supposedly, this pizza was first created by the baker Raffaele Esposito in Naples. His creation was immediately a favourite, and Esposito was called to make a pizza for the visit of King Umberto and Queen Margherita of Italy in 1889. During this visit, the queen was served a pizza in the colours

[42] http://entertainment.top54u.com/post/Top-10-War-Jokes.aspx, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

[43] **Unleavened** (especially in bread, cakes, cookies, etc.) means without leaven or leavening agent. Leaven is a substance, such as yeast or baking powder, that causes fermentation and makes the dough rise.

of the Italian flag: red (tomato), white (mozzarella), and green (basil). This pizza was subsequently named a margherita!

The first known pizza shop was Antica Pizzeria Port'Alba in Naples, which started producing pizzas for **peddlers**[44] in 1738, but expanded to a pizza restaurant in 1830 and still serves pizza from the same premises today. Pizza spread to America, England, France, and Spain but it was little known in these countries until World War II when many American and European soldiers tasted pizza in occupied Italian territory. The origin of the word pizza is uncertain. It is Italian for 'pie' and may have come from Latin *pix* or *pitch*, or Greek *pitta*.[45]

A few years ago, I was pleasantly surprised by a complimentary upgrade to business class on a Jet Airways flight from Delhi to Mumbai. It turned out that the flight was overbooked, and I had arrived (thanks to strong vehicular traffic en route) in the dying minutes of the closure of the check-in counter. I was offered a cold towel on arrival and a choice of cool drinks. I readily decided to sample all the complimentary drinks on offer (only soft drinks as per Indian rules), and my stomach must have truly marvelled at this new **concoction**[46] of orange juice, apple juice, and fresh coconut water I had fed it in record time before the tables were cleared and the plane took off. After this warm welcome arrived the elaborate dinner menu with a

[44] **Peddler** is a person who sells from door to door or in the street: *the ice-cream peddler outside school*. He is also a person who tries to promote some cause, candidate, or viewpoint.

[45] http://dictionary.reference.com/help/faq/language/e02.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

[46] **Concoction** is any foodstuff made by mixing different ingredients. It also refers to creation of a scheme or a story to suit some purpose: *he is adept at concocting stories to explain his habitual late arrival in office*.

choice of dishes in both vegetarian and non-vegetarian sections. Despite having resolved to stay away from non-vegetarian food for a week, I couldn't help but take a **furtive**[47] glance at the non-vegetarian options and immediately started feeling weak at the knees. A closer examination revealed some familiar and some exotic dishes and as I **gorged**[48] on the eclectic spread, I slipped the Jet Airways menu card into my handbag for detailed deciphering at a later date.

One part of me was extremely tempted to ascertain if 'regular' business class passengers could appreciate the contents of the menu. I almost planned to verify this from the gentleman seated next to me. But then I asked myself, 'Why should he know that I am not a business class regular? What if he is also a beneficiary of flight overbooking and strong vehicular traffic en route to the airport?' This helped me postpone my enquiry to posterity and subsequently completely **expunge**[49] it from my mind.

Entrées

- Tagine of lamb scaloppini (slow-roasted lamb scaloppini in mushroom, capers, garlic, olive, and thyme-based jus, served with mustard mash and macedoine of vegetables)
- Pan-seared pomfret (in lemon–parsley-walnut butter served with saffron potato and chunky ratatouille)

[47] **Furtive** is marked by quiet and caution and secrecy; taking pains to avoid being observed: *at social gatherings she's always lurking on the edge of the proceedings looking slightly furtive.*

[48] **Gorge** is to eat greedily.

[49] **Expunge** is to erase or eliminate, to strike out, or cross out: *the editor of the book corrected some factual errors and expunged some repetitions.* Expunge also means to efface, wipe out, or destroy completely; to

❖ Chicken tikka makhanwala (classic chicken tikka cooked with rich, creamy plum tomato gravy and cauliflower florets, and potato cooked home style, served with pea pilaf, black lentils, and set yoghurt)

I have underlined the words in this menu card that I didn't understand. As a result, I couldn't fully comprehend and appreciate the contents of what I ate on that flight. However, checking the dictionary turned out to be a never-ending exercise since the descriptions themselves had some more words that I did not understand. Below is a sample decoded version of the menu to help you better visualize the arrangement and aroma of what was served to me for dinner that day.

Main dishes

❖ Thin slices of lamb (usually further flattened by pounding with a mallet and **dredged**[50] in flour or breadcrumbs and **sautéed**[51] quickly) slow roasted in mushroom, **capers**,[52] garlic, olive, and thyme-based juice, served with mustard mash and a mixture of vegetables)

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annihilate: *when the judge realized she was innocent, he ordered that the whole incident be completely expunged from her records.*

[50] **Dredge** means to coat food by sprinkling with a powder, such as flour or sugar. Dredge also means to clean (usually from the bottom), to deepen or widen and also to unearth: *the college reunion dredged up old memories.*

[51] **Sauté** is to cook or brown in a pan with a small amount of butter, oil or other fat.

[52] **Caper** is a pickled flower bud of a Mediterranean shrub, used to make sauces, appetizers, and other dishes pungent.

- Pan-seared pomfret (in lemon–parsley walnut butter served with saffron potato and a French vegetable stew, typically consisting of eggplant, zucchini, onions, green peppers, tomatoes, and garlic)
- Chicken tikka makhanwala (classic chicken tikka cooked with a rich tomato gravy and cauliflower buds, and potato cooked home style, served with rice cooked with peas, black dal, and yoghurt)

This was a short-haul flight. If I'm not mistaken, this Delhi–Mumbai journey was covered in an hour and forty minutes and, as I mentioned, dinner was served. Since we are living in the twenty-first century, we can safely conclude that I commenced my journey in the evening. Now let's turn the clock back (quite a bit actually) and land ourselves in the Middle Ages.

You may find it strange that in the Middle Ages, dinner (invariably the biggest meal of the day) was served at noon. People usually woke up before dawn and 'broke' their 'fast' (the long gap between the last meal on the previous day and waking time) with a light meal of toast or some variation of **gruel**,[53] or porridge. No wonder this meal was aptly called 'breakfast'.

[53] **Gruel** is a light, usually thin, meal consisting of some type of cereal (oat, wheat, maize, rice) boiled in water or milk. It is a thinner version of porridge and usually drunk, not eaten. Historically, gruel was often made from millet or barley and, in hard times, from chestnut flour or oak nuts. It was the staple diet of humans, especially peasants. It was also given to invalids, children weaned off mother's milk, and prisoners. Interestingly, gruel gave rise to the word **gruelling**: very tiring, physically or mentally demanding to the point of exhaustion: *a gruelling election campaign*; *a gruelling marathon; a gruelling interview*, etc.

In this period, artificial lighting was expensive, unaffordable for the masses, and provided weak illumination at best. So people maximized their work output during the day by proceeding to their work soon after a quick breakfast at dawn. They went to sleep at sundown after their supper, which was again a rushed affair, a quick snack or cold leftovers from dinner. Supper was anyway considered an optional meal, as people often stuffed themselves so full at dinner that they could not eat again until the next day.

In the 1700s, the middle class expanded due to growth in trade and manufacturing, and more people could now afford lamps and candles. Besides, there was more to do at night. This was a period where the entertainment industry expanded rapidly, with theatres and operas available on a wider scale in cities like London and Paris, with most performances at night. With these late hours of entertainment and parties, and with more artificial lighting, many people in the cities began going to bed later and rising later in the morning. Mealtimes were pushed back as a result.

By the 1730s and 1740s, city dwellers were dining at 3 p.m. or 4 p.m. and, by 1770, their dinner hour in London was 4 p.m to 5 p.m. By 1800, with the establishment of factories, and then trains and streetcars, people began to work farther from home and dinner hour had been moved to 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. The women, tired of the long wait between breakfast and dinner (six to nine hours), established luncheon as a light midday meal of **dainty**[54] sandwiches and cakes.

[54] **Dainty** means (1) of delicate beauty; exquisite; elegant: *a dainty lace handkerchief*; (2) pleasing to the taste and temptingly served; and (3) of delicate discrimination or taste; particular; fastidious: *a dainty eater*.

Incidentally, when the Prince of Wales established a habit of lunching with the ladies, he was ridiculed for his **effeminate**[55] ways, as well as for his large appetite. Real men didn't do lunch, at least not until the Victorian era, when people finally came around to carrying a light midday meal from home to work. With the establishment of three well-defined meals in a day, gradually the concept of supper disappeared, but for an occasional serving at a late night ball.[56]

Now to confuse matters a little, I delved into the etymology of the word 'dinner'. To my utter surprise and disbelief, I discovered that 'dinner' actually means 'breakfast'! The word comes from Vulgar Latin[57] *disjējūnāre*, the Latin elements of which are *dis*—'reversal' and *jējūnāre*—'fast'. The word later contracted to *disnare* or *disner* in Old French, which eventually became 'dinner' in English.

English is full of such amazing surprises. I scratched my head in utter disbelief when I found out that sweetmeats are

[55] **Effeminate** means having qualities, characteristics, tastes, or habits traditionally considered feminine, such as softness or delicacy: *the tailor in our apartment's tailor shop had a rather effeminate manner*.

[56] Summarized from Sherrie McMillan's article titled 'What Time is Dinner?' that appeared in the October/November 2001 issue of *History Magazine*. You can find the full article at http://www.history-magazine.com/dinner2.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

[57] **Vulgar Latin** is the popular Latin, as distinguished from literary or standard Latin, especially those spoken forms of Latin from which the Romance languages developed. Vulgar Latin was the speech of the middle classes in Rome and its provinces. I wondered how the word vulgar, which means crude or indecent, got associated with the middle class. Then, I discovered that this word originally simply meant something pertaining to the common or ordinary people in a society.

candies while sweetbreads (which by the way aren't sweet) are, lo and behold, meat (specifically, the pancreas of a calf or a lamb)! There is no egg in eggplant, neither apple nor pine in pineapple, and neither sand nor wi(t)ch in sandwich!

The word **sandwich** has an interesting history. The sandwich is said to have originated over 2000 years ago with various combinations of meats and cheeses placed on bread or in pastry. However, this concoction didn't get its name until 1762 when the fourth Earl of Sandwich,[58] John Montagu, a British statesman and aristocrat, got hungry during a marathon poker game. It is said that he ordered his **valet**[59] to get him something to eat that wouldn't interfere with the game. The valet took slices of roast beef and put them between two pieces of toast. It was the perfect solution. He could eat a hearty meal with one hand and still be able to hold his cards in the other hand and continue playing.

It wasn't until the late 1800s that the term sandwich came to be used widely in the US. However, if there is one invention that made it a quintessential American lunch or snack item, it was the process for making peanut butter that was patented by John Harvey Kellogg (yes, the cereal king). In the beginning, peanut butter was marketed as a health food. By the 1920s, the price had dropped and was affordable by most families. About this same time the process for slicing and wrapping bread was invented and kids could make sandwiches without the dangers of having to slice the bread with a sharp knife. With high nutrition and low cost, peanut

[58] Sandwich is a town in Kent, England.

[59] **Valet** is a man's male servant, who takes care of his clothes and performs other personal services. A valet is also an employee, as in a hotel or on a ship, who performs personal services for guests or passengers.

butter sandwiches with sweet jam or jelly became wildly popular. It is estimated that the average American student will have consumed approximately 1,500 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches before graduation from high school.[60]

Sandwiches find favour with schoolchildren (easy to eat) and their mothers (easy to make). Bears like them too, especially, if **smeared**[61] with honey or peanut butter and stuffed with salmon. We all know about a bear's fondness for honey and salmon, but this is how I discovered its liking for peanut butter. On 14 June 1988, a six-foot-tall black bear **sauntered**[62] into a New Jersey school and was kept at bay for forty-five minutes with *peanut butter sandwiches* thrown to him by the schoolchildren. Imagine the situation had this bear suffered from arachibutyrophobia!

Now what is **arachibutyrophobia**? Well, I didn't know this term myself till I attended the finals of a quiz (as an audience member, in case you are wondering) held in Kolkata sometime ago. When all the competing teams failed to figure it out, the question was thrown open to the audience. To everyone's delight and surprise, a young man provided the right answer—it is the fear of eating peanut butter *sandwiches* lest the gooey stuff stick to the roof of one's mouth! Later,

[60] 'Fascinating Facts about the Sandwich', available online at http://www.chefs.com/ArticleDetails.aspx?articleID=70, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

[61] **Smear** means (1) to spread or daub an oily, greasy, viscous, or wet substance on or over something: *to smear bread with butter; (2) to stain, soil, sully, vilify, or destroy the good name or reputation of someone: the campaign to smear his name was politically motivated; and (3) to smudge or blur, as by rubbing: the signature was smeared and hence the document was not admitted in court.*

[62] **Saunter** is to walk with a leisurely gait, to amble, to stroll: *I sauntered through the park.*

the young man confessed that, having memorized as many as 720 phobias, he had to wait seven long years for someone to ask what arachibutyrophobia is!

Thus far, we have only focussed on the eating and completely ignored the drinking. I can assure you this is not deliberate. Given that carbonated soft drinks and hard drinks rank very low in my dietary preferences, these concoctions did not crop up in my mind for a discussion. Thankfully, it is not too late and we can make amends. Let us start with some of the most popular carbonated drinks.

Although Atlanta pharmacist and patent medicine maker Dr John Styth Pemberton invented **Coca-Cola** in May 1886, his bookkeeper, Frank Robinson, suggested its name. Being a bookkeeper, Frank Robinson also had excellent **penmanship.**[63] It was he who first scripted 'Coca-Cola' in the flowing letters, the letters that have become its famous logo now. Coca-Cola is derived from its two original principal ingredients—cocaine and caffeine. Cocaine comes from the Peruvian *coca* leaf and caffeine from the West African *kola* nuts and hence the name Coca-Cola.

It may not be a surprise to most of you that cocaine has been removed from the contents of modern-day Coca-Cola, so the word is now a partial **misnomer.**[64] Nevertheless, it continues to be the most well-known brand name (across all categories) in the world. It is reputed to be the second best-known word on Earth after *okay*. The brand value of

[63] **Penmanship** refers to the art of handwriting and also to a person's style or manner of handwriting: *poor penmanship*.

[64] **Misnomer** is an error in naming a person or thing. It also means a misspelt or inappropriate name or designation of a person: the name Tata Engineering & Locomotive Co. (Telco) had become a misnomer and on 22 July 2003, it was rechristened Tata Motors.

Coca-Cola is estimated to be close to 77.8 billion dollars in 2012.

It is interesting that Coca-Cola's name had to be changed while marketing it in China because the Mandarin **phonetic**[65] equivalent *Ke-Kou-ke-la* meant *bite the wax tadpole* or *female horse stuffed with wax* depending on the dialect. Coke then researched 40,000 Chinese characters and found a close phonetic equivalent *ko-kou-ko-le*, which could be loosely translated as *happiness in the mouth*.

By 1895, just nine years after its invention, Coca-Cola was selling well across the US. This triggered a mad rush among countless entrepreneurs to create a cola drink similar in taste. In the same year, a pharmacist Celeb D. Bradham finally succeeded in creating that beverage. He created that new concoction from sugar, vanilla, oils, cola nuts and other flavourings diluted in carbonated water. Originally named Brad's Drink, it was rechristened **Pepsi Cola** in 1898.

The word Pepsi is derived from a digestive enzyme 'pepsin' that has a root in Greek *pepsis*—'digestion' (further from *peptein*—'to digest'). This suggests that Pepsi, at least etymologically, has digestive properties! Prefix it with Greek *dys*—'abnormal' or 'difficult' and you have a word for 'indigestion'—**dyspepsia**, a common ailment that **afflicts**[66] humans.

[65] **Phonetic** is of or concerning the sounds of human speech. It also refers to the method of writing 'speech sounds' using a symbol for each distinct sound. In relation to word spellings, phonetic refers to the spellings that exactly correspond with the actual pronunciation of the word. For instance, if the word 'colonel', which is pronounced as '**kur**-nl', were also spelled 'kurnal', it would be referred to as a phonetic spelling.

[66] **Afflict** means to distress with mental or bodily pain, to trouble greatly, affect badly: *the old man feels absolutely helpless due to his inability to walk on his legs, afflicted with arthritis.*

Dyspepsia brings along any or all of the symptoms—abdominal discomfort, belching, flatulence, aversion to eating, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, constipation, heartburn—associated with the malfunctioning of the digestive system. Indigestion may be caused by disease but usually occurs because of stress, bad eating habits, excessive smoking, excessive intake of coffee or alcohol, or hypersensitivity to particular foods. A person with **deranged**[67] digestion is a **dyspeptic**.

Now let's imagine a person who has a morbid craving for alcoholic stimulants. You can call him a **dipsomaniac** (from Greek *dipsa*—'thirst' and *mania*—'madness, craze, excessive excitement, or enthusiasm'). Dipsomaniacs usually drink in excess of the safe drinking limit.[68] A dipsomaniac cares two hoots about the different ways *whisky* is spelled. For example, the one made exclusively in Scotland is spelled 'whisky'. Then, an 'e' gets into the 'whiskeys' made elsewhere in the world. However spelled, he knows that any good whisky will do for him. His motto:

When one drinks, he gets drunk
When one gets drunk, he feels sleepy
When one sleeps, he commits no sin
When one commits no sin, he goes to heaven
So let us all drink and go to heaven

While at it, let us talk about another kind of drink called grog and . . .

[67] **Derange** means to disturb the condition, action, or function of something. It also means to throw into disorder, to disarrange, or to make insane: *a deranged man who opened fire on innocent people, killing several of them.*

[68] As per **Antse's Law of Safe Drinking**, one and a half ounces of absolute alcohol per day is the upper limit of safe drinking.

One could also get drunk
Swilling[69] *this mixture of water and rum*
Why this adulteration, if you question
We have to make an etymological mention

Grog came to be this diluted concoction from 'Old Grog', the nickname of Vice Admiral Edward Vernon. In 1740, to minimize the effect of alcohol on his sailors, he ordered for the first time that rum (until 1970, officially issued to sailors) should be mixed with water.[70] Grog is often flavoured with lemon, sugar, and spices and, at times, served hot. These days, grog is any strong alcoholic drink and not only a mixture of rum and water.

Grog gives us the English word **groggy**, which originally meant drunk or intoxicated and now means dazed or staggering, faint or weak, as from exhaustion, blows, or drunkenness: *a boxer walked groggily after receiving his opponent's hard left jab*. It also means dazed and disoriented, as from lack of sleep: *late nights always make me groggy the next morning*.

[69] **Swill** means to drink or eat greedily or to excess. It also means a mixture of liquid and solid food, such as table scraps, garbage, or kitchen waste fed to animals, especially pigs.

[70] In English pubs and taverns of the seventeenth century, ale (a malt beverage, darker, heavier, and bitterer than beer) was ordered by the pint or the quart. Bartenders would keep a watch on the alcohol consumption of the patrons, so when customers got unruly, the bartender would yell at them, 'Mind your pints and quarts!' It's where we get the phrase 'mind your Ps and Qs'. This may also have been a reminder to bartenders not to confuse the two units, written as 'p' and 'q' on the tally slate. Another story of the origin comes from early printing presses. Printers placed individual letters on a frame to print a page of text. The letters were reversed, making it easy to mistake lowercase ps and qs in setting the type.

From rum, I recollect a very interesting concept of **proof spirit.** It was a pleasant evening in November 2008. We were returning to the guest house at Kamshet, a short distance from Mumbai, after a particularly good day of paragliding, and everyone was on a high. We picked up a few bottles of liquor and soon conversation veered towards our favourite drinks and associated trivia. One particularly knowledgeable fellow pilot wondered if we knew why his favourite brand of rum mentioned the alcohol content as '80 proof'. We also wondered, but in disbelief, as none of us had ever paid any attention to the print, and this was not even in fine print! I **supplement,**[71] what I remember of his story, with insights gleaned from Wikipedia:

Alcoholic proof is a measure of how much alcohol (ethanol) is contained in an alcoholic beverage. The measure is commonly used in the US, where it is defined as twice the percentage of alcohol by volume. Hence, '80 proof' rum contains 40 per cent alcohol. The measurement of alcohol content and the statement of this content on liquor bottle labels are regulated by law. The purpose of this regulation is to tax liquor differentially, based on its alcohol content, and to provide pertinent information to the consumer.

There is an interesting reason for the use of the term 'proof' to measure the alcoholic content. The term originated

[71] **Supplement** means (1) something added to enhance a thing, make up for a deficiency, or reinforce, strengthen, or extend it; (2) a part added to a book, document, etc., to give additional information or to correct errors; and (3) a separate section usually devoted to a special subject, inserted into a newspaper or other periodical: *today's newspaper carried a supplement on popular tourist destinations in Asia.*

in the eighteenth century, when payments to British sailors included rations of rum. To ensure that the rum had not been watered down, it was 'proofed' by **dousing**[72] gunpowder in it, and then tested to see if the gunpowder would ignite. If it did not burn, the rum contained too much water and was considered to be 'under proof.' The most dilute sample of rum that was proven to sustain combustion of gunpowder was defined to be 100 proof, which was estimated to contain 50 per cent alcohol.

It was later found out that combustion actually occurs at not less than 57.15 per cent alcohol by volume, which is very close to a 4:7 ratio of alcohol to total amount of liquid. From the eighteenth century and until 1 January 1980, Britain defined alcohol content in terms of 'proof spirit,' as defined above and then discontinued altogether. It was replaced by a new measure called ABV (alcohol by volume). The US continues to use this measure, however, and uses 1:2 ratio of alcohol to 100 degrees proof spirit instead of the actual 4:7.

Not to be outdone, another fellow pilot with a beer belly, challenged everyone to explain the difference between **draught** and **lager** beer. I had not heard of *lager* as a term outside of beer terminology, hence I was more curious to understand it better. **Lager** (pronounced **lah**-ger) is a type of beer of German origin that contains a relatively small amount of **hops.**[73] It

[72] **Douse** means to plunge into water or some other liquid: *she doused the clothes in soapy water*. It also means to throw or splash water or some other liquid on someone/something: *the children doused each other with the hose*. Douse also means to extinguish with water: *she quickly doused the embers to prevent the fire from flaring up again.*

[73] **Hops** are the dried ripe cones of the female flowers of a plant of species *Humulus lupulus*. They are used primarily as flavouring and stability agents in beer, to which they impart a bitter, tangy flavour.

is aged from six weeks to six months and usually stored in tanks at just-below freezing temperatures. The word comes from German *lager*—'storehouse, cellar'.

I was also keen to discover if this term has any usage beyond alcoholic. Apparently, this Germanic word is now used only in South Africa, where it refers to a camp, especially one defended by a circular formation of wagons. In the military, it is the name of a place where armoured vehicles are parked. It comes from the same German root that gave us *lager*—'storehouse, cellar' and further evolved from Old High German *legar*—'bed, **lair**'.[74]

Draught (pronounced 'drahft'), however, was a common word and it meant: (1) a drawing, sketch, or design; (2) a first or preliminary form of any writing, subject to revision; (3) a current of air, especially one intruding into an enclosed space (room or chimney); and (4) a selection or drawing of persons for military services, by lot or otherwise, from the general pool of people. This word is also used in banking and commerce (synonymous with 'bill of exchange') and in shipping (discussed earlier in chapter titled 'The Tata Nagar Wheeler Dealer').

However, the use of **draught** (or **draft** in American spelling) to explain a kind of beer has roots in yet another meaning of this word: an act of drawing or pulling loads. Until Joseph Bramah patented the beer pump in 1797, beer was served directly from the barrel or cask[75] and carried to the customer.

[74] **Lair** is the den or dwelling of a wild animal: *the cougar retired to its lair*. It is also a secluded or hidden place, especially a secret retreat or base of operations; a hideout or hideaway: *a pirate's lair*. In British English, it is a place in which to lie or rest, a bed.

[75] A **barrel** or **cask** is a hollow cylindrical container, with a flat top and bottom of equal diameter and slight bulge in the middle. It is traditionally made of vertical wooden staves bound by wooden or

The Old English word for carry was *dragen*, which developed into a series of related words, including *drag*, *draw*, and *draught*. By extension, the word for carrying or drawing a beer came to mean the serving of the beer and, in some senses, the act of drinking, or a drink of beer itself, whatever the serving method. By the time Bramah's beer pumps became popular, the use of the word *draught* to mean 'the act of serving beer' was well established and transferred easily to beer served via hand pumps.

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metal hoops. Over the years, due to custom or law, barrel sizes have evolved and different sized containers are used for different articles and also in different places for the same article. Historically, a beer barrel was a standard size of 36 gallons (140 litres) which has come down to 31 gallons (117 litres). An ale barrel has a capacity of 32 gallons (121 litres), wine is shipped in barrels of 31.5 gallons (119 litres) and a crude oil barrel has a capacity of 42 gallons (159 litres).

9

COFFEE AND CONVERSATIONS

Since we're on the subject of beverages we obviously cannot leave out coffee. Though not much of a coffee drinker myself (I prefer tea), I would usually accompany my pals to a nice coffee place called Mocha on Hill Road, Bandra, a hip and happening suburb of Mumbai. Mocha had the very alluring tagline 'Coffee and Conversations', which I found rather romantic, and it offered a bewildering range of coffees, cookies, and shakes. No wonder the place was always full of college students and young couples. Another favourite place to hang out with pals was a coffee house at Bandstand, Bandra, called **Barista,**[1] which offered amazing options to drink and eat and, with its **alfresco**[2] seating, a great sea view and unlimited cool sea breeze.

The carefree abandon of youth, dreams of numerous romantic conquests, and brilliant ideas to become millionaires overnight did not, sadly, leave any time to pursue knowledge

[1] **Barista** (Italian for 'bartender') is a person, usually a coffee-house employee, who prepares and serves espresso-based coffee.

[2] **Alfresco** means out-of-doors, in the open air: *an alfresco café*.

enhancement, especially if it meant expansion beyond the boundaries of curriculum and job description. Hence, even though I did not quite understand the finer differences between the various coffee options on offer like espresso, cappuccino, latte, mocha, Americano, etc., I simply went ahead with the majority decision, which was invariably to order cappuccino.

In later years, as my job description expanded, and I was under pressure to demonstrate vast extraterrestrial knowledge to suitably impress my clients, colleagues, and bosses (you see, eventually, progress is a lot about suitable conversations), I dug out the numerous extracurricular questions I had in mind but had never attempted to answer. Naturally, I commenced my conquest with coffee.

Espresso is not about a particular type of bean or roast or blend, it is just a way that coffee is prepared, shooting *pressurized* boiling water or steam through finely ground and *compacted* (Italian *espresso*—'pressed out') dark roast coffee beans. It is a strong coffee, served in small 30–60 ml shots and usually taken without sugar or any other additive. In India, you will often find that people incorrectly pronounce and spell it as 'expresso'. The confusion arose from the Xpresso branded machines that spewed out milky coffee at Indian weddings all through the 1980s and perhaps still do in some places!

American **GIs**[3] in Europe, during World War II, did not

[3] **GI** is a noun used to describe members of the US armed forces or items of their equipment. The term is now used as an initialism/abbreviation of 'government issue' (or often incorrectly 'general infantry') but originally referred to 'galvanized iron'. During World War I, US soldiers sardonically referred to incoming German artillery shells as GI cans. In that same war, 'GI' started being interpreted as 'government issue' and as an adjective of anything having to do with the army.

like the strong flavour of espresso and added hot water to approximate the regular drip coffee to which they were accustomed. Thus **caffé Americano** or **Americano** was born. **Cappuccino** (our favourite) is an Italian coffee drink prepared with espresso, milk, and tonnes of steamed milk foam. And if one reverses the quantity of milk and milk foam—add tonnes of milk and some steamed milk foam to espresso—it gets us **caffé latte** or **latte**. Incidentally, **caffé breve** is an American version of the latte where espresso is added with steamed *half-and-half* (a 50:50 mixture of milk and cream), instead of milk. A word of caution: if you order a *latte* in Italy, it will get you a glass of milk! In Italian, *latte* means 'milk'.

Incidentally, Mocha, the 'coffee and conversations' place in Mumbai, and Mocha, the port city on the Red Sea coast of Yemen, are indeed connected—via coffee. The Mocha of Yemen is one of the two contenders for the birthplace of coffee. It is famous for being the major marketplace for coffee from the fifteenth century until the seventeenth century. Even after other sources of coffee were found, Mocha beans continued to be prized for their distinctive flavour—and are prized so even today.[4] From these beans, English language gained the word **mocha**, which is now used for a distinct kind of coffee made by adding espresso with milk, chocolate syrup, and whipped cream.

But your choice of brew is just enough to fuel a chat till your coffee actually arrives on the table. We need to go right back to the beginnings to have enough fodder for a proper conversation over coffee.

It all started with dancing goats. According to legend, Kaldi, a ninth century goatherd in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia),

[4] www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mocha, last accessed on 12 September 2012

while basking in the sun, observed his goats dancing on their hind legs after eating some red berries. He tasted the berries and his sleepy eyes opened. His exhilaration prompted him to take some red berries to a holy man in a nearby monastery. But the holy man disapproved of their use and threw them into the fire, from which an enticing aroma billowed. The roasted beans were quickly **raked**[5] from the embers, ground up, and dissolved in hot water, yielding the world's first cup of coffee. The story of Kaldi, however, did not appear in writing until 1671 and is probably **apocryphal.**[6]

Other accounts attribute the discovery of coffee to Omar Sheik. Omar, known for his ability to cure the sick through prayer, was once exiled from Mocha to a desert cave near Ousab. Starving, he chewed berries from a nearby shrubbery but found them to be bitter. He tried roasting the beans to improve the flavour but they became hard. He then tried boiling them to soften the bean, which resulted in a fragrant brown liquid. On drinking the liquid, Omar was revitalized and the energy sustained him for days. As stories of this

[5] **Rake** is an agricultural implement with teeth or **tines** (a sharp, projecting point or prong, as of a fork) for gathering cut grass, hay, etc. or for smoothing the surface of the ground or for gathering in money on a gaming table. As a verb, rake means (1) to gather, draw, remove with a rake: *to rake dead leaves from a lawn*; (2) to clear, smooth, or prepare with a rake: *to rake a garden bed*; (3) to gather or collect abundantly (usually followed by in): *he marketed his invention and has been raking in money ever since*; and (4) to bring to light, usually to show someone in bad light: *to rake up an old scandal.*

[6] **Apocryphal** is something that is false, spurious, of doubtful authorship or authenticity: *he told an apocryphal story about losing the family jewels, but it turned out that he had pawned them to sustain his habit of drinking and gambling.*

'miracle drug' reached Mocha, Omar was asked to return and was made a saint.[7]

Robusta and Arabica are the two most common varieties of coffee grown around the world and grow in cool lowlands and cooler highlands, respectively. It is interesting to note that the beans found their way from Ethiopia or Yemen (take your pick for historians are divided on this) to the highlands in the eastern spice haven—Java and the Caribbean island of Jamaica. Some coffee found its way on to the slopes of the Andes and a few stray beans also crossed the Pacific to be 'Kona'ed[8] on a Hawaiian Island.

Coffee drinkers also evolved their own unique techniques to prepare and savour their cuppas. So, if the Bahasa speaking Javans like their Kopi Luwak, freshly brewed after being selectively handpicked from the poo of Asian palm **civets**[9] found in the coffee plantations, well the Tamilians of India like their hot *kaapi* filtered through brass filters and then mixed with milk and flung in and out of tumblers to get the right Iyer's Yard Coffee. The Japanese don't waste time in brewing the coffee; they like it instant, at times with added

[7] www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coffee#History, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[8] **Kona coffee** is the market name for coffee (*Coffea arabica*) cultivated on the slopes of Mount Hualalai and Mauna Loa in the North and South Kona districts of the Big Island of Hawaii. This coffee has developed a reputation that has made it one of the most expensive and sought-after coffees in the world. Only coffee from the Kona districts can be legally described as 'Kona'. The Kona weather pattern of bright sunny mornings, humid rainy afternoons, and mild nights creates favourable coffee growing conditions.

[9] **Civets** are small, cat-like, lithe-bodied, mostly arboreal mammals native to the tropics of Africa and Asia, though their muzzle is extended and often pointed, rather like an otter or a mongoose.

flavours from a white fungus found on coffee beans, especially those processed in the monsoon along the Malabar Coast of India.[10]

The French always know how to make a fuss out of nothing at all. What would have been a plain brew the world over is intricately thrown into a contraption and allowed to brew with the delicateness and perfection of a Parisian in a French press or *cafetière à piston*. Vivacious and generally loud Italians blow a lot of hot air into their cups of coffee to get the perfect espresso. The Arab world loves its brew sweet and served in little shot-sized cups and one could almost float a spoon in a cup of thick, dark Turkish coffee.

A drink that was banned by the Muslims, then by the Ottoman empire, even by the Ethiopian Orthodox church is today amongst the largest traded commodities in the world (second after oil) and the world's second most consumed beverage. (The first is, by the way, not beer or tea but water!)[11]

[10] **Monsoon Malabar coffee**, one of the world's most exotic coffees, was discovered by accident when a cargo of coffee beans aboard a wooden-hulled ship acquired a unique tang after being somewhat exposed to the elements during a particular monsoon while negotiating the Cape of Good Hope. Exposed to the monsoon winds for a few weeks, the coffee flavours become richer and smoother. Monsoon Malabar coffee is full-bodied and has very low acidity with a spicy woody flavour (Source: http://www.coffee-roasters.com/gourmet-coffees/Monsoon-Malabar-coffee.htm). Now, the coffee growers on India's Malabar Coast store their green coffee harvest in large warehouses where it waits for the monsoon rains. When the rains arrive, the warehouse doors are opened, and the moist monsoon air circulates around the coffee beans, making them swell and take on a slightly yellow colouring (Source: http://www.coffeebeanshop.co.uk/Single-Origin-Coffees/Monsoon-Malabar.htm).

[11] This write-up on coffee was contributed by Narayan Swamy, a friend and colleague.

I was quite perplexed by Kopi Luwak. I had to unravel the mystery behind this unusual and rather nauseating method of collecting the coffee beans. This is how it goes: At any given point during a harvest, some coffee berries are not quite ripe or are overripe while others are just right. The palm civet evolved as an omnivore that naturally eats fruit and passes undigested material as a natural link to disperse seeds in a forest ecosystem. Where coffee plants have been introduced into their habitat, civets only **forage**[12] on the ripest berries, digest the fleshy outer layer, and excrete undigested seeds.

By selecting the most flavourful beans, the civet created problems for the typical farmer, who found a lot of his best berries missing in the morning after the civets had fed there. To recover the lost crop, farmers gathered the civet droppings and tried to reclaim their seeds. This resulted in the discovery that the droppings actually produced an exceptional coffee with unusual taste. No wonder Kopi Luwak is the most expensive coffee in the world, selling at 100–600 dollars per pound! It is sold mainly in Japan and the US by weight and served in coffee houses in Southeast Asia by the cup. It is increasingly becoming available elsewhere, though supplies are limited; only 1000 pounds (about 450 kg) at most make it into the world market each year.

After coffee, let us now turn to the conversations that accompany it. Of the various elements of a conversation, one is wit. A **quip** is a clever, witty remark. Sample the following conversation between a patient and a nurse for traces of wit and ingenuity.

[12] **Forage** is to seek, rummage, hunt, wander or go in search of food or provisions. As a noun, it is also used to refer to the food or fodder for horses or cattle: *despite being weakened by high fever, the cow had to go out and forage for fodder.*

In room 607, Winston Forest was just getting out of his street clothes. He asked the nurse: 'Do I have to wear one of those idiotic hospital gowns that leave my tail hanging out?' 'No', she said, smiling—'You can wear your own pajamas'. 'Good! The last time, right after my attack, I was in those damn gowns all the time. I have a theory: patients would recover a lot faster if they were not subject to the ***indignity***[13] *of being bare assed all the time.' 'And I always thought the embarrassment was an incentive for patients to get better faster and go home', quipped the nurse.*

The nurse had ready wit, this you would admit. But if there's something on which you would like to come back with a quip, but cannot think of anything to say right away, it is what French call staircase wit (*escalier d'esprit*). This is something you think you should have said, but you think of it going down the stairs, after the party is over!

The word *quip* has linguistic company in **repartee**: a ready, witty, or smart reply; a quick and clever retort. Since its origin is French, the double '-ee' at the end is pronounced '-ay' giving it a smart, urbane lilt—'re-paar-tay'. This makes the word sound as sparkling as the idea it expresses: a witty exchange of elegant words.

Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, and Benjamin Disraeli were masters of repartee. There is a classic tale about a conversation that took place between Sir Winston Churchill and Lady Astor. Nancy Astor was an American socialite who

[13] **Indignity** means insult, humiliation, something that causes injury to a person's pride or dignity: *the indignity of being imprisoned is full public view acted as a deterrent for perpetrators of cyber crime.*

married a wealthy Englishman and then used her marriage as a springboard to get into the top tier of English society. (She holds the distinction of being the first woman to take a seat in Parliament.)

At a dinner party in 1912, Lady Astor became annoyed at an inebriated Churchill, who was pontificating on some topic. Reaching the end of her patience, she blurted out: 'Winston, if you were my husband, I'd put poison in your coffee.' Churchill famously replied: 'Nancy, if you were my wife, I'd drink it.' ☺

There is another classic tale about a conversation between George Bernard Shaw and a journalist. On his ninetieth birthday, Shaw was interviewed by a young journalist, who as he was leaving expressed the hope that he would be able to interview Shaw when Shaw was a 100 years old. With characteristic self-confidence, Shaw replied: 'I don't see why not, you look healthy enough.'[14] ☺

Benjamin Disraeli was a British prime minister, Conservative statesman, parliamentarian, and literary figure. He was Britain's first, and thus far, only prime minister born into a Jewish family (originally from Italy). He was also famous for his shrewd maxims and repartee. Once, at a social gathering, William Gladstone, his political rival from the Labour party, said to Disraeli: 'Sir, you will either die on the gallows or of some unspeakable disease.' 'That depends, Sir,' Disraeli promptly responded, 'whether I embrace your policies or your mistress.' ☺

[14] George Bernard Shaw died on 2 November 1950 at the age of 94 years. Incidentally, he is the only person to have been awarded both a Nobel Prize for Literature (1925) and an Academy Award (1938) for his work on the film *Pygmalion* (adaptation of his play of the same name).

The word repartee originated in the seventeenth century (in 1635, if you want to be **pedantically**[15] accurate), when it was used by the fashionable set to describe a quick, witty retort. It originally comes from a French fencing term meaning 'an answering blow or thrust'. The dictionary suggests it was interchangeable with words such as 'riposte' and 'badinage', both of which are now as dead as the occupants of an undiscovered Egyptian burial chamber. Other words like 'banter' (which has survived well) mean much the same thing, but they sorely lack that elegant quality. The difference between 'repartee' and 'banter' is the difference between a **soufflé**[16] and scrambled eggs.[17]

In repartee, one's focus is quick wit, without a care for whether one's words **unwittingly**[18] or otherwise, offend the sensibilities of the listener. However, in certain situations, one's focus is predominantly to couch something unpleasant or painful in words that do not hurt. This art of using mild, pleasant, or indirect words or phrases in place of more accurate or direct ones that may appear harsh or unkind is defined by **euphemism** (from *eu*—'good' and *pheme*—'voice').

[15] **Pedantic** means old-fashioned, narrow and tiresome focus on book learning, concern with minute details or formal rules: *the pedantic style of teaching is increasingly getting replaced by more practical, interactive, and fun-based learning methods.*

[16] **Soufflé** is a light baked dish made fluffy with beaten egg whites combined with yolks, white sauce, and fish, cheese, or other ingredients. A similar dish made with fruit juices, chocolate, vanilla, etc., and served as a dessert is also called a soufflé.

[17] http://www.thetimes.co.za/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=910548, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[18] **Unwittingly** means unintentionally, unconsciously, inadvertently, accidentally, etc.: *when I inquired about their plans to have children, I unwittingly touched upon a subject of considerable conflict between them.*

The most commonly exemplified euphemism is—*he has passed away*, or *he has gone to his heavenly abode*, for someone who has died.[19]

The root 'eu' also combines with the Greek root *logia*—'speaking' to form **eulogy** meaning a speech or writing in praise or admiration of a person or thing.[20] This word is especially used as a formal expression of praise in honour of a deceased person: *in his eulogy to the late politician, the mayor brought out his contribution to the constituency*. It has a synonym **encomium**, which denotes warm praise for both persons and things that are an outcome of human action: *the principal's speech was full of encomiums for the students who received awards*.

The root 'eu' also combines with *phone*—'sound' to give us **euphony**, a pleasant and sweet sounding voice. Euphony also means a harmonious combination or succession of sounds: *he fell asleep to the euphonious chime of temple bells*.

Here is an amusing incident that took place when Nobel laureate William Faulkner visited Japan on behalf of the US Department of State. He spoke to a **conclave** of several thousand students. Though only a few of them understood what he was saying, all were deeply respectful. Faulkner spun out one amusing anecdote for fifteen minutes at the end of which the official interpreter thought it wise to repeat

[19] In the navy, death is synonymously referred to as *Davy Jones*. It is not uncommon for seafarers to say, if a person has died, that he has gone to *Davy Jones' Locker*. **Davy Jones** is actually meant to represent the bottom of a sea or ocean and is also used to refer to the spirit of the sea; sea devil. And **Davy Jones' Locker** is also the ocean's bottom, especially when regarded as the grave of all who perished at sea (be it humans or even the ships).

[20] The eulogy to an inanimate object is normally out of poetic licence.

the story in Japanese. Somehow, he managed this in less than twenty words, yet the audience burst into **tumultuous** laughter. 'How could you tell my story in such few words?' marvelled Faulkner. 'I didn't tell it at all,' admitted the interpreter. 'I simply said that Mr Faulkner has just told a very funny story, everybody will kindly laugh.' ☺

Originally, **conclave** was a room in which the cardinals would assemble to elect a Pope. It has now expanded to mean any closed assembly. It is in this sense that the word has been used here (conclave of several thousand students). The word comes from two Latin words *con*—'with' and *clavis*—'key' and etymologically means a room that can be locked. Locking of a room reminds me of an interesting story on why it takes a conclave to elect a Pope. A history of political interference in these elections and, consequently, long vacancies between popes, and most importantly the **interregnum**[21] of 1268–1271, prompted the Second Council of Lyons to decree in 1274 that the electors should be locked in seclusion *cum clave* (Latin for 'with a key'), and not permitted to leave until a new Bishop of Rome had been elected. Conclaves are now held in the Sistine Chapel in the Palace of the Vatican.[22]

Tumult is a din or uproar, produced especially in a large mass of people. It also means a general outbreak, riot, uprising, or other disorder. It also signifies the agitated state

[21] **Interregnum** is (1) the interval between the close of a sovereign's reign and the accession of his or her legitimate successor; (2) any period during which a state has no ruler or only a temporary executive; (3) any period of freedom from the usual authority; and (4) any pause or interruption in continuity: *the period of economic prosperity was marked by a brief interregnum due to unprecedented drought in the country.*

[22] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papal_conclave, last accessed on 12 September 2012

of the mind: *his placid* ***façade***[23] *failed to conceal the tumult of his mind.*

After this humorous anecdote, let us check out a case of financial repercussions of inappropriate family conversations. An elderly gentleman had serious hearing problems for a number of years. He went to the doctor and the doctor was able to have him fitted for a set of hearing aids that allowed him to regain perfect hearing. The elderly gentleman went back in a month for a follow-up visit and the doctor said: 'Your hearing is perfect. Your family must be really pleased that you can hear again.' The gentleman replied: 'Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to the conversations. I've changed my will three times!' ☺

Given that most of us converse all the time, English has amply supported us with multiple roots for the craft of speaking, and one such root that we can discuss now is Latin *loqui*—'to speak'.

A **loquacious** person likes to talk a lot. He may or may not be straightforward in his speech but that trait is not within the scope of this word: *a loquacious pseudo-intellectual with little skill; a loquacious politician with no substance*. English has an exclusive word for the art of speech where a person

[23] **Façade** is a superficial appearance or illusion of something: *they somehow managed to maintain a façade of wealth*. In architecture, it means the front of a building, especially an imposing or decorative one or any side of a building facing a public way or space and finished accordingly: *behind the elegant façade lie all the modern facilities you would expect from a hotel of this calibre*. This word is pronounced as *fuh*-**sahd** due to the presence of bottom half of a miniature cursive 'z' (called 'cedilla') below the letter 'c'. Cedilla is a diminutive of the Old Spanish name for this letter, ceda. Modern Spanish no longer uses this diacritic, although it is still current in Portuguese, Catalan and French.

does not talk straight and instead talks in circles. The speech of this direct-talk evading specimen is defined in English as **circumlocution** (*circum*—'circle').

Then there is a category of people, especially entertainers, who practise the art of speaking with little or no lip movement that creates an illusion that the sound is coming from elsewhere. They are called **ventriloquists** (Latin *ventris*—'belly'). Originally, this sound was believed to come from the *stomach* and now expanded to include a puppeteered 'dummy'. In the Middle Ages, the noises produced by the stomach were thought to be the voices of the dead, who took up residence in the stomach of the ventriloquist. The ventriloquist would then interpret the sounds, as they were thought to be able to speak to the dead, as well as foretell the future.

Let me introduce you to my neighbour, Mr Jagannath Bakshi (fondly called Uncle Jugs), a meek, submissive husband. But the other day, I was **baffled**[24] by the loud and domineering tone of Uncle Jugs emanating from his house, commanding and dictating household chores to his wife. More surprising was the seemingly meek submission by Mrs Bakshi who did not seem to be retorting at all. Very surprised at this sudden turnaround, I couldn't resist peering into his house. I saw Uncle Jugs face to face, not with Aunty, but with the mirror on her dressing table! This is also an art (though there is no one to appreciate it, barring an odd eavesdropper or two!)—the art of talking to oneself. It is called a **soliloquy**. It comes from Latin *solus*—'alone' and *loqui*—'to speak'. Soliloquy is also a dramatic or literary form of discourse where a character reveals his or her innermost thoughts, seemingly oblivious to

[24] **Baffle** is to confuse, bewilder, perplex, frustrate or confound: *the technical language of the instructions baffled him.*

the presence of an audience. Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' is perhaps the most famous soliloquy in literature.

Uncle Jugs did pretty well before the mirror but the moment it came to facing Mrs Bakshi, flaring nostrils and all, his rehearsals would come to naught and he would meekly submit: '*Yeeeeeeeees darling! I will . . . Sorry . . . I'm . . . going to . . . market . . . right way . . . oops . . . right away!*'

A complete contrast to the interrupted **gibber**[25] above is an **eloquent** speaker whose speech is characterized by

[25] **Gibberish** is a collection of words that don't convey any meaning: *I am sure his answer will be 30 per cent repetition, 30 per cent wild conjecture, and 40 per cent utter gibberish*. In addition, gibberish is meaningless or unintelligible talk or writing or what contains obscure, pretentious, or technical words, and it also refers to rapidly or quickly uttered words.

clarity and effectiveness. This person is articulate, fluent, expressive, and often persuasive. My memory of this word goes back to school days where our English teacher used to extol the eloquence of Marcus Antonius by saying: 'He had great powers of *eloquent* cajolery or persuasive flattery! He seemed to have *kissed the Blarney stone*!'

Marcus Antonius (83 BCE–30 BCE), a Roman politician and soldier, gave one of the most memorable speeches in history. It was dramatized by William Shakespeare in the play *Julius Caesar*, where he used Antonius's famous opening line 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears . . .'

I subsequently discovered that the Blarney stone is lodged in the stone wall of a fifteenth century castle in the village of Blarney, Cork county, Ireland. Since it is in an almost inaccessible spot on the **parapet,**[26] kissing the stone is quite a feat and, according to legend, endows the kisser with *the gift of the gab* (great eloquence or skill at flattery). Do note that fluency in speech in not the hallmark for eloquence as even a *garrulous*, *glib* or *voluble* person talks a lot. However, an eloquent person is not only fluent, he is persuasive and, hence, effective.

A **garrulous** person is very talkative, though he may not necessarily be quick and fluent, and his content is always pretty useless and unimportant. A **voluble** person is garrulous and quick and fluent as well. A **glib** person is voluble but with a twist—the contents of his speech are different. They are generally flattering and untrustworthy,

[26] **Parapet** means a low protective wall or railing along the edge of a balcony, roof, etc. In military use, it is a mound of sandbags, a stone embankment, etc., in front of a trench, protecting soldiers from enemy fire. It is also an elevation on the main wall of a fort.

as in the case of this salesgirl about whom this is what a woman told her husband when she returned home from shopping with an armful of parcels—'*The salesgirl at the shop couldn't believe that such a glamorous woman like me was not in films!*'[27] Thus far is still **palatable,**[28] even when the husband knows that his wife is really not glamorous at all. However, he soon realizes that this flattering comment from the glib salesgirl has cost him a neat 10,000 rupees in the form of several new dresses. ☺

Somewhere in the middle of all these nuances, we come to the strange phenomenon of transposing syllables in a phrase. The culprit is Dr William Spooner (1844–1930). Dr Spooner was a distinguished Anglican clergyman and warden of New College at Oxford but it was his habit of unintentionally interchanging syllables of words in a phrase that made him more popular than his work. Hence the terminology—**Spoonerism.**

Some quotations attributed to Spooner:[29]

- 'The Lord is a shoving leopard' ('*loving shepherd*')
- 'It is kisstomary to cuss the bride' ('*customary to kiss*')
- 'Mardon me, padam, this pie is occupewed. Can I sew you to another sheet?' ('*Pardon me, madam, this pew is occupied. Can I show you to another seat?*')

[27] Walter Vieira, *Pride and Style in Selling Ideas, Services & Products* (IBH, Mumbai, 1986), p. 48.

[28] **Palatable** means acceptable or agreeable to the **palate** (roof of the mouth); tasty or savoury. It also means acceptable to the mind or feelings: *I left the question hanging, for none of the answers seemed palatable.*

[29] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spoonerism, last accessed on 12 September 2012

- To a student: 'You have hissed the mystery class' ('*missed the history*')
- To a lady at a college reception: 'You'll soon be had as a matter of course' ('*mad as a* ***Hatter***[30]*, of course*')
- 'Let us glaze our asses to the queer old Dean' ('*Let us raise our glasses to the dear old Queen*')
- 'We'll have the hags flung out' ('*flags hung*')
- 'a half-warmed fish' ('*half-formed wish*')
- 'Is the bean dizzy?' ('*dean busy*')
- 'Go and shake a tower' ('*take a shower*')
- 'a well-boiled icicle' ('*well-oiled bicycle*')
- 'Kinquering congs then tatles tike' ('Conquering kings then titles take')

After this brief interlude, it is time to get back to explore a new root for speech and voice (Latin *voc*, *vox*—'to call'), and all the words that originate from it. One of them is actually the central theme of this book—vocabulary. **Vociferous** means loud, noisy, or vehement in making one's feelings known; clamorous: *the taxi union was quite vociferous in demanding a steep hike in fares*. To **vocalize** is to verbally communicate an idea or a thought. When we *vocalize* our thoughts, we lend voice to them.

When you **provoke** someone, things are said or done which incite or rouse anger in them. You must have noticed how people react when provoked—they *vocalize* their **indignation**[31] and disgust, duly supported by ample

[30] **Hatter** is a person who makes, sells, or repairs hats. In informal Australian usage, hatter is a person who has become eccentric because of living alone in a remote area.

[31] **Indignation** means strong displeasure at something unjust,

gesticulation.[32] **Vocation** is any work that one is fitted to do or has a duty to perform. It normally concerns our trade, profession or occupation. If you are a pilot, that is your vocation. There is another word **avocation** that describes what we do as our hobbies or interests, literally, a minor occupation undertaken as a diversion. So if banking is my vocation, writing this book has been an avocational effort.

You may wonder how the root *voc*—'to call' contributes itself to words like vocation and avocation. Vocation was formed under a conviction that one is *called* by god to do a particular kind of work. Avocation is a later creation (by adding prefix *a*—'away') and hence etymologically 'a calling away from one's occupation'. Then we have an **advocate**, the person who backs, supports, sponsors, *speaks*, or even campaigns in favour of something or somebody: *Mahatma Gandhi was a staunch advocate of non-violence.*

Let us go through a couple of paragraphs from the judgement passed in the Supreme Court of India on 11 November 1980 in the court case of *Maru Ram and Others* (Appellants) v. *Union of India and Others* (Respondents).[33] Believe me, this is not a test of reading comprehension

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offensive, or insulting; righteous anger: *indignation at massive corruption in government departments resulting in violent public demonstrations.*

[32] **Gesticulation** means an animated or excited gesture, a deliberate vigorous motion: *John played the role of a mad man to perfection with his wild gesticulations, confused looks, sporadic episodes of laughter, shouting, and crying.*

[33] All India Reporter, 1980, SC 2147

or an exercise to recall difficult words, so just relax and have fun as you try to decipher the author's intention. Or should I say 'contention'? Now I'm confused but you carry on . . .

Maru Ram and Others (Appellants)
v.
Union of India and Others (Respondents)

1. A procession of 'life convicts', well over two thousand strong, with more joining the march even as the arguments were on, has vicariously mobbed this Court, through their learned Counsel, carrying constitutional missiles in hand and demanding liberty beyond the bars. They challenge the vires of Section 433A of the Criminal Procedure Code (Procedure Code, for short) which compels 'caging' of two classes of prisoners, at least for fourteen eternal infernal years, regardless of the benign remissions and compassionate concessions sanctioned by prison law and human justice. Their despair is best expressed in the bitter lines of Oscar Wilde. The Ballad of Reading Gaol . . .[34]

10. There has been much over-lapping inevitable in plural orality but the impressive array of arguments on a seemingly small point does credit to the expansive potential of the forensic cosmos but brings despair when we contemplate the utter chaos in court having regard to the total litigation crying for justice. A new modus vivendi is as imperative as it is urgent if the kismet of the court system must survive the challenge—'to be or not to be'.

[34] **Gaol** is another spelling for the word 'jail'.

I can visualize you muttering in disbelief if this is indeed an actual court judgement or a piece of fiction! But I am sure you would all agree that this is an exceedingly fine example of usage of more words than necessary to express an idea and also of use of unnecessarily complicated words in place of simpler common day terms. English defines such piece of writings by the term **verbiage**, and the person thus over-**embellishing**[35] conversation is called **verbose**. The root of these words (Latin *verbum*—'word') also forms the word verbatim. **Verbatim** is exactly as spoken or written: *since John could not attend the physics lecture, I jotted down the lecture verbatim for his reference.*

Abiding by the general rule of English—an antonym for every word—we begin our research for a counter to verbosity. We come across a conversation between a husband and a wife:

After a very long church service that US President Calvin Coolidge attended, his wife asked him what the sermon had been about. 'Sin', said Coolidge. 'What did the Reverend say about it?' she wanted to know. 'He was against it,' Coolidge replied!

Anybody could tell that Coolidge was a man of few words. We could say it in even fewer words—Coolidge was **laconic.**[36] Interestingly, the word laconism (also laconicism) comes from the city of Laconia, an ancient region of southern Greece, dominated by the Spartans in the fourth century BCE.

[35] **Embellish** means to beautify or adorn: *the palace is richly embellished with lavish stone carvings*. Embellish also means to enhance a statement or narrative with fictitious additions.

[36] Terse, brief, concise, economical, curt, etc. are some of its popular synonyms.

Spartans were noted for their austere lifestyle and this austerity apparently extended to speech as well, perhaps the source of the word laconism. Once when an Athenian herald said to them, 'If we come to your city, we will raze it to the ground', the Laconians merely replied, 'If'.

A study discovered that the daily quota of speech for women is 25,000 words compared with just 12,500 for men, and it helped me relate to the saying that '*if child rearing had been totally a man's responsibility, the art of speech would have become extinct in a few generations*'.

Since we devoted this chapter to speaking and drinking coffee, let me share some interesting trivia on how fast different languages can be spoken. French can be spoken most rapidly because as many as 350 French syllables can be pronounced in a minute. The comparative figures for some of the other prominent languages are—Japanese (310), German (250), and English (210). Despite this handicap, English remains the most widely spoken language in the world. As per some estimates, it is spoken by over 1.5 billion speakers, with approximately 375 million speakers for whom English is a first—and often only—language, another 375 million speakers who speak English as their second language, and 750 million speakers who are learning or have learnt English as a foreign language.[37]

After some more years into my job, as the job description expanded further, it included brief but mandatory two calls a day from office to exchange significant and also not-so-significant developments of the day with my significant other.

[37] David Graddol, *The Future of English?: Guide To Forecasting The Popularity Of The English Language In The 21st Century* (The British Council, London, 1997), p. 10.

I will get to how we ended up sharing copious cups of tea later! 'Coffee and conversations' with pals soon gave way to 'tea and **tête-á-tête**'[38] in the privacy of home, as we updated each other on accomplishments, happenings, and thoughts of the day over cups of green tea.

[38] **Tête-á-tête** means a face-to-face meeting, or private conversation between two people, usually in an intimate setting: *our tête-á-tête was interrupted by the invasion of our kitchen by a couple of cats.*

10

MY RENDEZVOUS WITH ENGLISH

Preparing and drinking tea with family and friends is a pastime that has been perfected through its long history of use in India, China, Japan, and Thailand. However, the arrival of tea leaves in Britain in the 1660s did create problems for some people. In 1685, the widow of the Duke of Monmouth sent a pound of it to her family in Scotland. They examined it for some time and then asked the cook to work out what to do with it. He boiled the leaves, threw the water away, and served up the result in the same way as he served up spinach. Needless to say, it was not enjoyed by the family and guests, and it is said that the general reputation of tea suffered for some time in Scotland.[1]

Teatime was conversation time in college. Even though only one snack was served with tea, and that too in limited quantity, multiple refills of tea were allowed. Thus, we would routinely sit for far longer that the customary ten minutes it takes to wrap up this ritual. This was the time for

[1] J.S. Laurie, *Select Anecdotes: From Various Sources,* (Thomas Murby & Simpkin, London, 1864)

freewheeling[2] conversation and offered an opportunity to get exposed to some unfamiliar words and some familiar words with unfamiliar pronunciations.

This was also a time for regret and reflection on why English words and their crazy pronunciations never drew my interest in school. Why, like most others in my class, was I only focused on mathematics and the sciences? I could only appreciate the efforts of our English teacher when I grew older and joined college. Since then, speaking in English has become a norm rather than an academic compulsion and correct pronunciations are fundamental to this process.

Our English teacher tried his level best to get this bunch of **yokels**[3] to take interest in his subject. He would religiously explain the meaning(s) of each and every difficult word in the text along with its pronunciation(s) and expected us to note these down and revise them at home. In contrast, our learning habits encouraged overlooking the words that our brains signalled were first-timers.

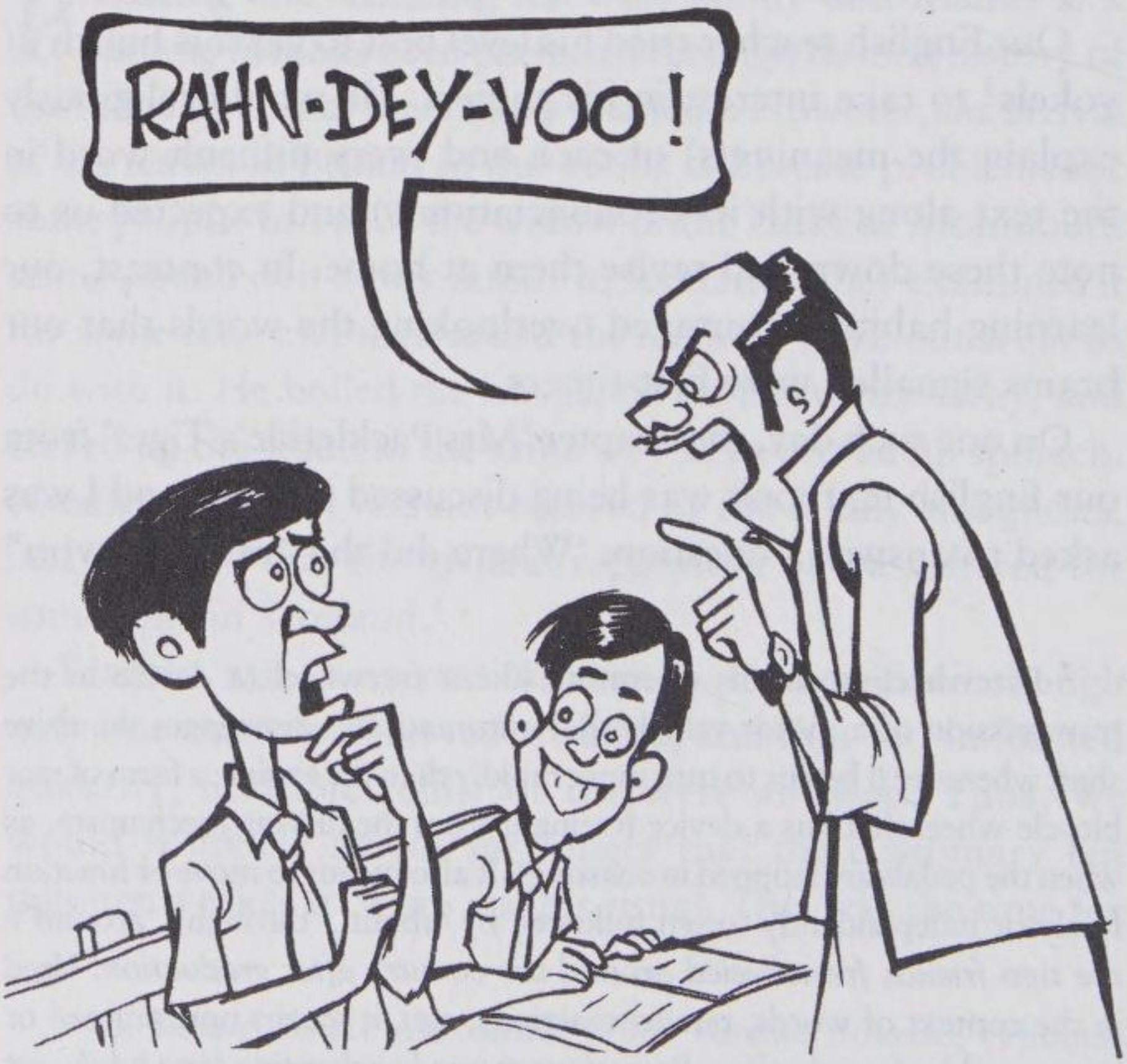
On one such day, the chapter 'Mrs Packletide's Tiger' from our English textbook was being discussed in class, and I was asked to answer a question: 'Where did the "**rahn**-dey-voo"

[2] **Freewheeling** means operating like a freewheel (a device in the transmission of a motor vehicle that automatically disengages the drive shaft whenever it begins to turn more rapidly than the engine; a form of rear bicycle wheel that has a device freeing it from the driving mechanism, as when the pedals are stopped in coasting). It also means to move or function freely or independently (often followed by 'about', 'through', 'around'): *the two friends freewheeled around the country after graduation.* Used in the context of words, remarks, actions, etc., it means unrestrained or irresponsible: *freewheeling discussions seemed enchanting for a while, yet he yearned for something more intellectually stimulating.*

[3] **Yokel** is a rustic person, a country bumpkin: *the tourists claimed to be from a metro but acted like local yokels.*

of Mrs Packletide and the tiger take place?' 'Pardon sir!' Perhaps the words hadn't caught my proper attention, I thought. The **venerable**[4] teacher repeated the question without losing his temper, but I still couldn't understand this seemingly simple question and begged pardon a second time. This time, the soft tone of my teacher caught rough weather. I tried to strain my memory . . . No! I hadn't read anything as weird as '**rahn**-dey-voo' . . . 'I don't know sir!' I gave up in despair.

Surprisingly, even though I ranked amongst the brighter students of the class, almost all the other fellows seemed



[4] **Venerable** means respected, revered, honoured, admired: *there is an acute shortage of venerable politicians.*

to know the correct answer. As the answer was approved—the '**rahn**-dey-voo' of Mrs Packletide and the tiger took place in a forest—I realized where I had faulted. All along I had thought **rendezvous**[5] was pronounced phonetically as 'ren-dez-vos'. I lost my reputation but learnt a new pronunciation.

This also helped dispel the myth I held that English is largely phonetic but for the few well-known oddities of K-silent, P-silent in *know*, *known*, *knowledge*, *psychology*, *pneumonia*, etc. and of course the two well-known toughies from the army—Colonel (**kur**-nl) and Lieutenant (lef-**ten**-*uh*-nt in British use, except in the navy and loo-**ten**-*uh*-nt elsewhere).

I also vividly recall my English schoolteacher's words about the three pillars of good English—'*Grammar perfect. Spellings correct. Pronunciations exact.*' We were also required to supplement these three pillars with good handwriting, so that impact of the language didn't get dampened. Any illegibility in our work and he would complain—'Why do you have such a characteristically unsteady hand? Were your parents shaky in their plan to have you in their clan?' I earnestly tried to improve my handwriting but the more I tried, the more aware I became of my **incontrovertibly**[6] **fallible**[7] **orthography**.[8]

[5] **Rendezvous** means an agreement between two or more persons to meet at a certain time and place. It is also the name for the meeting place itself: *his salon has become a rendezvous for jobless gossipmongers.*

[6] **Incontrovertible** is unquestionable, indisputable, and undeniable: *the phenomenon of death is an incontrovertible fact.*

[7] **Fallible** means likely to be false, imperfect or wrong; *human beings are fallible and a few learn from their mistakes.*

[8] **Orthography** is the art of writing with proper letters, grammar and spelling: *the irregular spellings and non-standard grammar rules of traditional orthography pose the toughest challenge for the teachers to make young pupils understand and remember.*

But pronunciations were surely within my reach, I realized to my great relief. My quest received a big **impetus**[9] when I joined the engineering college at Chandigarh. Living in the constant company of virtual linguists and lexicographers (the blokes from good convent schools) seemed more like living in their *shadow*.

Between themselves, they would **wager**[10] on the pronunciation of *pince-nez* (**pans**-ney) and *polygamy* (p*uh*-**lig**-*uh*-mee) and on the subtle differentiation between the pronunciation of *accept* (ak-**sept**) and *except* (ik-**sept**). The word *subtle* itself, I was informed, was pronounced with its 'b' axed (**suht**-l) and *polygamy* was the only word among others prefixed with 'poly' (polyclinic, polyester, polyglot, polymer, etc.), where *poly* lost its regular pronunciation '**pol**-ee' and changed to a 'p*uh*-**li**'. An academically bright boy had been reduced to a dumb spectator, and this feeling was very **debilitating!**[11]

But the quest for improvement had already begun and help poured in from all quarters to quickly take me out of this pronunciation **cesspool.**[12] The more I conversed with my

[9] **Impetus** means a stimulus, boost, an impelling force. It also refers to the force or energy associated with a moving body: *the announcement of monetary rewards added new impetus to the ideas challenge and the team contributed hundreds of revenue generation and cost reduction ideas.*

[10] **Wager** means a bet or a gamble: *the magician added a little wager with the audience which got them more interested in his act.*

[11] **Debilitate** means to make something or someone weak or feeble: *the treatment of cancer left him extremely debilitated.*

[12] **Cesspool** is a cistern, well, or pit to retain the sediment of a drain or receiving sewage from a house: *there was no proper sewerage system in cities and waste was dumped in open large cesspools that were emptied twice a year.* It also means any morally or physically filthy place: *I sometimes wish journalists would not lump all politicians into the same cesspool.*

friends, especially on subjects as diverse as possible, the more I got exposed to and **surmounted**[13] the phonetic challenges inherent in the language.

I got talking to a photographer on a train ride to a family friend's engagement ceremony, and he showed me some of his recent creations. He called his profession *photography* (*fuh*-**tog**-r*uh*-fee) and called himself a *photographer* (*fuh*-**tog**-r*uh*-fer)—words I pronounced as 'fo-to-gra-phy' and 'fo-to-gra-fer', respectively. At my request, he gave me a thirty-minute primer on photography, covering technical aspects like lenses, filters, exposure, lighting angles, and softer ones like framing, depth of field, etc. The only solace from this conversation was his ratification of the way I pronounced the word *photograph* (**fuh**-t*uh*-graf).

When I reached the destination, I headed straight to the reception desk and inquired about the direction to the venue (Suite 712). The lady at the reception had a *sweet* voice but I wondered if it gave her the freedom to distort simple pronunciations like *suite* (soot)! But I also knew that employees in the hospitality industry usually have an **impeccable**[14] diction, so I checked. I painfully concluded that she had indeed

[13] **Surmount** means to cross over, ascend to the top of, mount upon: *she showed tremendous grit to surmount Mt Kilimanjaro despite a physical handicap*. It also means to overcome, conquer, prevail over, get over or across (barriers, obstacles, difficulties, etc.): *he surmounted tremendous financial difficulties and finally earned his Ph.D degree*. This word is a combination of a prefix *sur* meaning 'over, above, in addition' (occurring mainly in words borrowed from French e.g. surreal, surpass, surcharge) and 'mount'.

[14] **Impeccable** means faultless, flawless, someone or something you cannot find fault with: *he has impeccable credentials for the job of heading the country's central bank*. It also refers to someone who is not liable to or capable of sin.

earned her freedom, but from words like suite (pronounced 'sweet') that were phonetically challenged.

At this ceremony, I found myself seated *adjacent* to a girl with a charming style and a disarming smile; we got chatting and parted as friends. When I mentioned this fact excitedly to a friend later, he asked me to first drop the 'd' in adjacent (*uh*-**jey**-s*uh* nt) if I wanted to proceed with my storyline.

Thanks to some help from my *bosom* (**boo z**-*uh* m) pals and some more help from other quarters, my pronunciation improved considerably. However, there are still times when I am surprised to see *beaus* (bohs) lining up to entice the *cynosure* (**sahy**-n*uh*-shoo-r) of their eyes, meet a *damsel* (**dam**-z*uh* l) in a state of ***dishevelment***[15] (di-**shev**-*uh* l-ment), read about a *consortium* (k*uh* n-**sawr**-shee-*uh*-m) of companies making a *monopoly* (m*uh*-**nop**-*uh*-lee), or the ***denouement***[16] (dey-noo-**mahN**) of a *demon* (**dee**-m*uh* n); come across a *taciturn* (**tas**-i-turn) person and his *tacit* (**tas**-it) understanding, or a ***bigot***[17] (**big**-*uh* t) and his *bigotry* (**big**-*uh*-tree).

[15] **Dishevel** in the physical context means to let down, as hair, or wear or hang in loose disorder, as clothing: *don't be alarmed by the somewhat dishevelled appearance of some of the people you'll see here, they are reputed scientists completely consumed in their research, leaving no time or desire for personal grooming*. Dishevel also means to mess up, cause untidiness, throw into disorder, or rumple. In the emotional context, it refers to the disturbed, upset, or unsettled state of mind: *George was slightly dishevelled after he came to know that he has been passed over for promotion.*

[16] **Denouement** means the final resolution or outcome of the intricacies of a plot, as of a drama or novel: *the long-drawn and bitter struggle for power and control reached a tragic denouement.*

[17] **Bigot** is a person who is utterly intolerant of any differing creed, belief, or opinion: *he often accused his father of sounding like a racist*

I am also amazed to see the ***myriad***[18] (**mir**-ee-*uh* d) designs of ***façades*** (f*uh*-**sahds**) of the homes of the rich and famous, get distressed at the ***roughshod*** [19](**ruhf-shod**) treatment by the bourgeois (b*oo* r-**zhwah**), and feel relieved that the ***unguent*** [20](**uhng**-gw*uh* nt) of time acts as ***panacea***[21] (pan-*uh*-**see**-*uh*) and cures all. There has also been a rare occasion where even I have returned the favour by treating my pals in a *restaurant* (**res**-t*uh*-rahnt) and a *discotheque* (dis-k*uh*-**tek**).

The icing on the cake perhaps is the pronunciation of the word pronunciation itself. Most people pronounce it as 'pro-**noun**-see-**ey**-sh*uh* n' perhaps because of their ignorance of the change in the spelling of the root word as it turns from verb to noun. It should actually be pronounced as 'pr*uh*-nuhn-see-**ey**-sh*uh* n'. Did you also know that *queue* is the only English word that retains its original pronunciation even when the last four letters are dropped?

Pronunciations, like words, kept slipping from my mind, until I started using these words as part of my active vocabulary. I also started noting down the most mispronounced words in my diary and hoped that someday I would not need to consult this list at all. That day is still far away.

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bigot, saying he ought to expand his mind to accept other communities as equals.

[18] **Myriad** means a large or indefinite number of people or things: *the ecological park had a myriad of creatures from shrimps to sharks, penguins to dolphins, and a myriad of flowers bursting into bloom.*

[19] **Roughshod** is to treat harshly, to override or crush: *he rode roughshod over his friends to advance himself in the business world.*

[20] **Unguent** is an ointment or balm, usually liquid or semi-liquid, to apply to wounds, sores, etc.: *unguent jars in the pharmacy.*

[21] **Panacea** is a remedy for all diseases or ills; a cure-all. It also means an answer or solution to all problems or difficulties: *the proposal offers no panaceas, only new grounds for hope and action.*

Inspired by my own difficulties in memorizing the phonetic table (usually given at the beginning of any dictionary) and then using it to accurately capture the correct pronunciation, I would not recommend you go down that path. It is an entirely different experience to hear the correct pronunciation, replay it a few times, and say it aloud to yourself as it replays. Almost all online dictionaries (dictionary.com, thefreedictionary.com, yourdictionary.com, merriam-webster.com, etc.) have excellent audio pronunciation options. Do make liberal use of them—they are complimentary.

11

DR PANDU PIPLANI

'Good observation powers are a tremendous help in enriching one's vocabulary. One needs to observe lots of signboards, public notices, print texts on the cartons of consumer products, and even the classifieds columns. Who knows when an odd word or two, from here and there, if and when it feels like, may pop up in front of our eyes?'

So far, I had achieved limited success with advertisements but never thought of expanding my interests to other forms of visual and print media. And I drew this conclusion only in 1997 while on a visit to my parents' place in Rohtak.

I grew up in this city but had stayed largely insulated not only from its signboards and public notices but also its culture and the local dialect. The sole reason was the self-sufficient campus of the government women's college where we stayed and where my mother taught. The campus had badminton and basketball courts, a table tennis room, and a huge playground. In the evenings, all the facilities were thrown open to the faculty and their wards, and we made good use of them. There were enough playmates on the campus and school friends were always eager to expand the size of this enthusiastic playing team. There were perks in

the form of college girls practising for their intra- and inter-college tournaments.

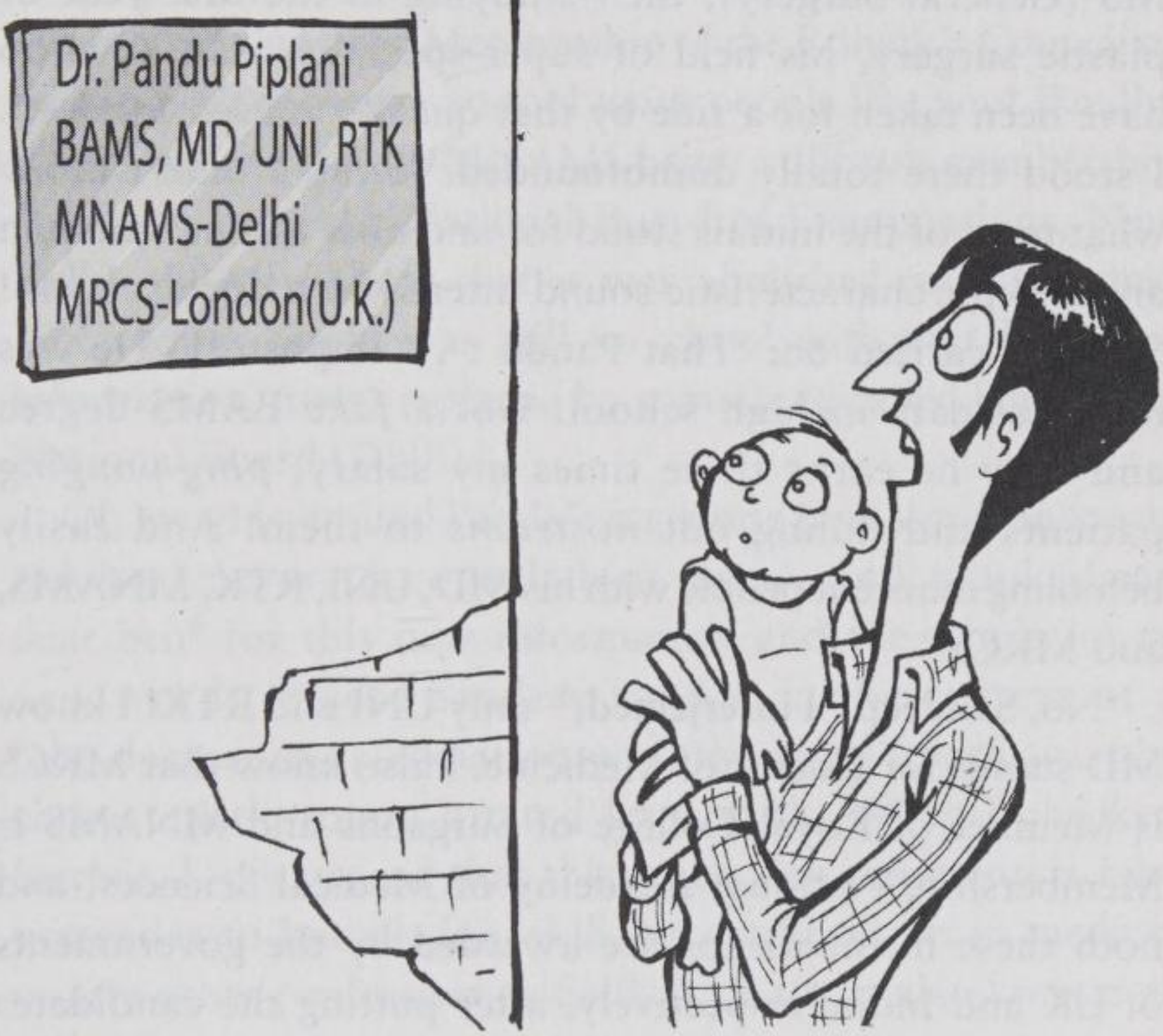
Our school was also just outside the gate of this campus. We did get out of this cosy **ecosystem**[1] when we visited our friends or when parents took us along on visits to their friends. Shopping for provisions was largely in the hands of parents, who occasionally consented to give us first-hand exposure to bargaining techniques. However, contrary to the opportunity of wearing our best clothes, we were required to put on the dresses that were well-worn. This, as per one theory, prevented the shopkeeper from quoting an inflated price, based on his false assessment of our purchasing power.

So, there were limited opportunities to notice billboards, and I was not keen on checking out the print texts on the cartons of consumer products and product advertisements in the newspapers and magazines. Somehow, I had this impression that companies who spent a lot of money on advertisements eventually built that cost into the price of the product. Hence, wasn't I being made to pay to read the advertisement?

The year 1997 was different. I had spent two years in the MBA programme and a year thereafter working in marketing for financial services. One day, I was returning home after a **nostalgic**[2] trip to my old school and my eyes fell on a long queue of patients outside a doctor's clinic. The doctor's qualifications were truly impressive and so, I assumed, must be his skills.

[1] **Ecosystem** is a collection of living things and the environment in which they live. For example, a prairie (large open area of grassland) ecosystem includes coyotes (wild wolf-like dogs), the rabbits on which they feed, and the grass that the rabbits eat.

[2] **Nostalgia** is a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life, to one's home or homeland, or to one's family and friends; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place



I knew BAMS—Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery. I also knew MD—Doctor of Medicine. However, despite my keen interest in the abbreviations of specialized degrees, I didn't know too many others in the medical profession besides **MBBS, MS, BDS, MDS, FRCS, MRCS, DM, MCh, DNB** and **MNAMS**. I was instantly impressed and almost simultaneously depressed—impressed with the doctor's qualifications and depressed at the limited range of my knowledge and that too in the subject of my keen interest.

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or time: *the fifteenth school reunion evoked the nostalgia for the carefree and fun times at school.*

I presented my query to my friend Sandeep, an MBBS, MS (General Surgery), then studying in the first year of plastic surgery, his field of super-speciality. 'So you too have been taken for a ride by that quack?' mused Sandeep. I stood there totally **dumbfounded.**[3] First, I didn't know what most of the initials stood for and now this new human angle to the characteristic sound uttered by a duck (quack)! Sandeep carried on: 'That Pandu . . . **Impostor!**[4] He was my classmate in high school. Got a *fake* BAMS degree and now he earns three times my salary, *ping-ponging* patients and doling out *nostrums* to them! And easily befooling innocent people with his MD, UNI, RTK, MNAMS, and MRCS!'

'No, Sandeep!' I **interjected,**[5] 'only UNI and RTK! I know MD stands for Doctor of Medicine. I also know that MRCS is Member of Royal College of Surgeons and MNAMS is Membership, National Academy of Medical Sciences, and both these memberships are awarded by the governments of UK and India, respectively, after putting the candidates through a tough examination.'

'You don't know anything; this is full of deceit and trickery!' Sandeep exploded. 'MD, UNI is Maharishi Dayanand UNIversity! And RTK? It is an abbreviated RohTaK, the city where MD, UNI is located and you come

[3] **Dumbfounded** means speechless with amazement; astonished: *I was dumbfounded by the ease with which my friend bungee jumped from the top of a skyscraper.*

[4] **Impostor** is a person who deceives or cheats others under an assumed character, identity, or name: *an impostor robbed a house after gaining entry by posing as an employee of a pest control company.*

[5] **Interject** means to insert between other things, to interpose: *to interject a clarification of an earlier statement.*

from! Moreover, this guy is not a real MRCS! He and some other quacks have formed their own local council and hence proudly display their Membership of the Rohtak's Council of Surgeons. It is so easy to fool *naive* people like you! Finally, while you are right on MNAMS being a difficult membership to obtain from the National Board of Examinations, New Delhi, did you know that it was abolished on 30 August 1982 while Pandu was still in school with me? For your information, it was replaced by something called Diplomate National Board (DNB).'

Oh wow! I admired Pandu's ingenuity (and simultaneously resolved never to consult him, ever), and thanked my dear **bro**[6] for this new information and the whole lot of new words. Before Sandeep used it in the context of a fake doctor, my association with the word **quack** was the characteristic sound uttered by a duck. When I checked further, I discovered that this word also represents a fake pretender to knowledge, skill, or qualification in medical or any other profession or field. A quack is also known as a charlatan.

Sandeep had also mentioned that Dr Piplani earned three times more than him, a competent and genuinely qualified surgeon. I wondered if by *ping-ponging* patients, he meant that Dr Piplani had a table tennis table in this clinic and routinely won financial bets in games with his patients or their accompanying relatives! I was aware that this word was originally applied to the game of table tennis since a ball keeps getting tossed from one side of the table to the other; 'ping' and 'pong' being imitative of the sounds of the ball hitting the paddle.

[6] **Bro** (slang) means a brother, friend, pal, or buddy.

Since this proposition of playing ping-pong with patients to gain prosperity sounded too **preposterous,**[7] I checked the dictionary to make sure the word had not **mutated**[8] to an entirely new meaning. I was relieved that it hadn't, except there was new application of this term in its figurative sense, and that Dr Piplani didn't need to invest in a table tennis table or sweat it out, around it.

The word **ping-pong,** in context of medicine, refers to a custom in some private nursing homes where rich patients are passed on from one specialist to another (like a ping-pong ball) on false pretexts with the aim of extracting a fat sum of money from them. Ping-pong also refers to any other rapid or regular movement that is back and forth: *for two years, he ping-ponged on weekends between Chennai, where he worked, and New Delhi, where his wife studied.*

Are you wondering how quacks can prescribe suitable medicines? I tell you, they don't always, and that is why medicine prescribed by a quack is referred to as a **nostrum**—medicine sold with fake or **exaggerated**[9] claims and with no demonstrable value. It is usually made by the same person who recommends it. It comes from Latin *nostrum*—'our', and refers to the seller's calling the drug 'our' drug.

[7] **Preposterous** means completely contrary to nature, reason, or common sense; absurd; senseless; utterly foolish: *for the ancients, it was a preposterous idea that the earth is round and revolves around the sun.*

[8] **Mutation** is an alteration or change, as in nature, form, or quality: *due to genetic mutation at a young age, he was now much taller than his identical twin.*

[9] **Exaggerate** means (1) to magnify beyond the limits of truth; overstate; represent disproportionately: *he deliberately exaggerates the health risks posed by a sedentary lifestyle to spur his friend into action*; (2) to increase or enlarge abnormally: *those shoes exaggerate the size of my feet.*

Sandeep had alleged that Dr Piplani was taking *naive* people like me for a ride. Initially, I admit that I could not lay my hands on this word in the dictionary, as Sandeep had pronounced it 'nah-**eev**' (which is indeed the correct pronunciation). **Naive** (also naïve) means simple and guileless, unsophisticated, and not artificial: *a child with a naive charm*. It also means lacking worldly experience, judgement, and understanding: *he has a naive attitude towards politics*.

Let me admit that like most of you, I cannot decipher a doctor's prescription. Besides the use of medical parlance, which is natural and expected, they seem to have mastered the art of **brevity**[10] which makes everything seem very cryptic. For instance, doctors place this sign 'Rx' before every diagnosis and prescription, and I wonder what they intend to convey! Surely, it cannot suggest 'risk' to the patient's life, as that is not true in all ailments. Some people believe that Rx is an abbreviation for the Latin word *recipere* or *recipe*, which means 'take, thou'.

In the days before manufactured drugs, **apothecaries**[11] (who also served as doctors) would write out a recipe for medication. They would then mix and **compound**[12] the ingredients to make drugs or remedies that their patient shall 'take' as advised. Incidentally, not until well into the nineteenth century was the distinction between the apothecary/

[10] **Brevity** means shortness of time or duration; briefness: *the brevity of human life*. It also represents the quality of expressing much in a few words; terseness: *brevity is the soul of wit*.

[11] **Apothecary** is a druggist, a pharmacist, the one who prepares and sells drugs and other medicines.

[12] **Compound** as a verb means to make or form by combining parts, elements, etc.: *to compound drugs to form a new medicine*. It is this action that has lead to the creation of the job of a **compounder**.

pharmacist (as a compounder of medicines) and the physician (as a therapist) generally known and accepted.[13]

Some people also believe that the symbol Rx is derived from the major lines in the symbol of the Eye of Horus. Horus, an Egyptian god, was the god of the sky, of light, and of goodness. He was the son of Isis, the goddess of nature, and Osiris, the god of the underworld. Osiris was murdered by his evil brother Seth, the god of darkness and evil. Horus sought to **avenge** his father's death by challenging his uncle Seth to a fight. Seth cut out Horus's eye but Thoth, a god associated with wisdom and compassion, magically restored the eye. Horus did defeat Seth, finally. Horus's eye, also called the wadjet eye, became a symbol of good and restored health.[14]

I am sure doctors pray for the speedy recovery and good health of their patients. However, not all of them could have the required artistic abilities or the time to draw Horus's eye as a symbol of this prayer. Therefore, they have adopted the simplified version 'Rx' to write before every diagnosis and prescription.

From this tale of diagnosis and prescription, I recollect reading about an incident where a man with a **gore**[15] on his leg comes to see a doctor. Upon examination, the doctor confirms

[13] http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/1641/what-does-the-pharmacists-symbol-rx-mean, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[14] http://www.endomail.com/articles/ad13rx.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[15] **Gore** means an injury resulting from a pointed object, a stab. It also means bloodshed from a wound, especially when coagulated. In informal usage, it means killing, fighting, violence: *it's a gore, that's for sure*. Incidentally, the adjective form **gory** is more commonly used. Gory means covered in gore, horrific or bloodthirsty (*a gory story*) or involving bloodshed and killing (*a gory battle*).

that the injury is superficial and prescribes antibiotics and pain-relieving tablets to prevent it from turning infective and painful. However, he is curious to understand the circumstances resulting in this injury and hence inquires:

'Though I am sanguine the wound won't sore,[16]
How did you get this sanguinary gore?'

The patient also responds with a rhyming couplet:

'Doc! It was an outcome of a heated situation
With one of my consanguine relations'

Sanguine means hopeful, positive, or optimistic: *the prime minister is sanguine that the economy will not go into recession*. **Sanguinary** is characterized by bloodshed: *a long and sanguinary struggle for independence*. And **consanguine** means blood relationship. Therefore, the gore is an outcome of a sanguinary row between consanguine relations, and the doctor is sanguine that the wound shall not get infected or become too painful.

What do you expect from the doctor? In this case, a thorough dressing of the wound, medicines and some good advice. Here is what he says, remarkably once again in a rhyming couplet:

'These antibiotics are what I prescribe,
And heated situations

[16] **Sore** means physically painful or sensitive, including due to infection or abscess. It also means something that causes great mental pain, grief, sorrow, suffering, misery, hardship, etc.: *he is sore because of a bereavement in the family* or *he is sorely in need of funds for his wife's treatment*.

With consanguine relations
I would strictly proscribe'.

Proscribe is to prohibit. The doctor prescribes antibiotics and proscribes fighting!

Let us further enrich our medical vocabulary and hope that it would also add to our knowledge about the human body. Our exploration shall commence from the head—rather what grows on it—and then we shall progress downwards. Let us begin with some trivia on **hair**. Do you know that an average human body has a total of 5,00,000 hair and as many as 1,00,000 of them are on the head alone? Did you also know that hair growth on the body is not uniform during the day? It is slowest at night and quickest between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. and then from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.[17]

Interestingly, one can differentiate between a Caucasian, Negroid and a Mongoloid purely by looking at a cross-section of hair. Negroids have hair follicles with a helical form and an *oval* cross-section. Mongoloids have follicles that are completely straight with a *circular* cross-section. A Caucasian counterpart's hair stands between these two extremes with the cross-section like an accentuated ellipse (O).

Isn't it also interesting that if a man has *hair* on his head, it represents a full head and hence virtually uncountable strands of hair? On the contrary, *hairs* on his head would imply a few wisps or strands left on his balding pate! This anomaly (of singular tense signifying greater numbers than the plural) and many others, that the English language is

[17] www.copperwiki.org/index.php/Baldness, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

[18] **Pepper** means to sprinkle like pepper powder. It also means to hit someone with rapidly repeated short jabs, to pelt (attack with repeated

peppered[18] and **replete**[19] with, are known as the *vagaries* of English. **Vagary** is an unpredictable or erratic action, strange occurrence or instance: *the vagaries of weather*. It also means a whimsical, wild, or unusual idea, desire or action. Vagary comes from Latin *vagari*—'to wander', the root of the word *vagabond* as well. **Vagabond** is a person who wanders from place to place without any settled home; a nomad. It could also mean someone who is disreputable or worthless.

Let us come back to a person with a balding pate. Try making fun of someone's baldness and you are being **ribald.**[20] If you want help to remember this word, without necessarily living this experience, try associating *ribald* with the rhyming word *bald*.

Now let us move inside the head and explore the **brain**. We discussed earlier in the book that the daily quota of speech for women is 25,000 words compared with just 12,500 for men. You might wonder whether such a glaring difference is purely environmental or due to some genetic coding. Yes, there is indeed a slight structural difference in the brains of men and women that causes this anomaly. Men are usually

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blow or missiles): *they peppered the speaker with hard questions*. It also means to make (a speech, for example) lively and vivid with wit or invective.

[19] **Replete** means abundantly supplied, overflowing. I had originally used the word **surfeit** in place of replete. One of my friends asked me to substitute it with replete and he explained that while surfeit has a similar meaning (overindulgence in eating or drinking; an excessive amount: *a surfeit of soldiers*), it is followed by an 'of' and not 'with' as I had used: *surfeit of options for the lunch*. Surfeit is a noun while replete is an adverb.

[20] **Ribald** is coarse, indecent, and rather filthy use of language: *the good music was marred by the ribald lyrics of the song*.

left-brain-oriented in their thinking, while women generally think with the brain's right hemisphere. The left side is responsible for logical, analytical, factual, and aggressive centres of thought and behaviour, while the right side harbours the centres of feeling, language, communication, imagination, and creative skills.

So far, it is fair, as at least different faculties have been evenly distributed. However, there is one startling distinction! US researchers have found that brain cells deteriorate faster—as much as three times faster—in the male species than in the female. The fastest goners are cells involved in language, reasoning and conceptualization. Therefore, they recommend the next time you are looking for sound advice, grandma might be a better bet than grandpa![21]

It is also interesting to note that, contrary to popular belief, it is a medical fact that it is *not* the grey but the white cells that do all the *thinking*. After the death of Albert Einstein, when the scientists examined the slides of his brain, they found that his brain had a much greater percentage of grey cells as compared to white cells. It may lead to the conclusion that Einstein was, after all, not so intelligent! Or you may dismiss the medical fact given that Einstein's intelligence is an incontrovertible fact. The truth lies in the revelation that the job of grey cells is actually to take away the *fatigue* of the *thinking* white cells! Hence, Einstein's large reservoir of grey cells constantly refreshed his white cells to support his pace of thinking.

Let us now get inside the head to sample what the brain has to offer. **Neurosurgery** is the surgery of the brain, and the doctors who perform such surgeries are called **neurosurgeons.**

[21] *Health Magazine*, June 1991 issue

These words come from Greek *neuron*—'nerve', which is an apt description for the brain, since it is predominantly composed of nerve cells. However, it is not always that the disorders of the brain need **interventional**[22] therapies. The physician who remedies the disorders of the brain, the spinal cord, and the rest of the nervous system with the use of non-**invasive**[23] methods like medicines, exercises, etc. is called a **neurologist.**

Neuron also gives us **neurosis**, a nerve disease, and **neurotic**: a person affected by or suffering from neurosis. However, neurosis does not retain its medical linkage any more and has transformed itself into a mental disorder in which a person is prone to excessive anxiety, obsessive thoughts, compulsive acts, emotional disturbance, indecision and a degree of social and interpersonal maladjustment. For instance, a neurotic may wash his hands several times a day (specifically, suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder),

[22] **Intervention** means the act of intervening, intruding or interfering in the affairs of another. In medical parlance, it refers to surgical procedures done as a last resort, if the problem is not controllable through medicines and other non-surgical methods: *he consulted Dr Ruchi Gupta, an interventional cardiologist, for an angioplasty.*

[23] **Invasive** means something that intrudes, offensive, involving invasion or intrusion: *phone tapping was brutally invasive of his privacy.* In medical parlance, it means (1) something that requires the entry of a needle, catheter, or other instruments into a part of the body, especially, in a diagnostic procedure, such as a biopsy: *an invasive diagnostic instrument*; (2) tending to spread, especially tending to invade healthy tissue: *the invasive cancer cells had spread from the site of their origin to other tissues*; and (3) specifically in surgery, it refers to making a relatively large incision in the body to access the target of the surgery, as opposed to making a small incision or gaining access endoscopically through a natural orifice.

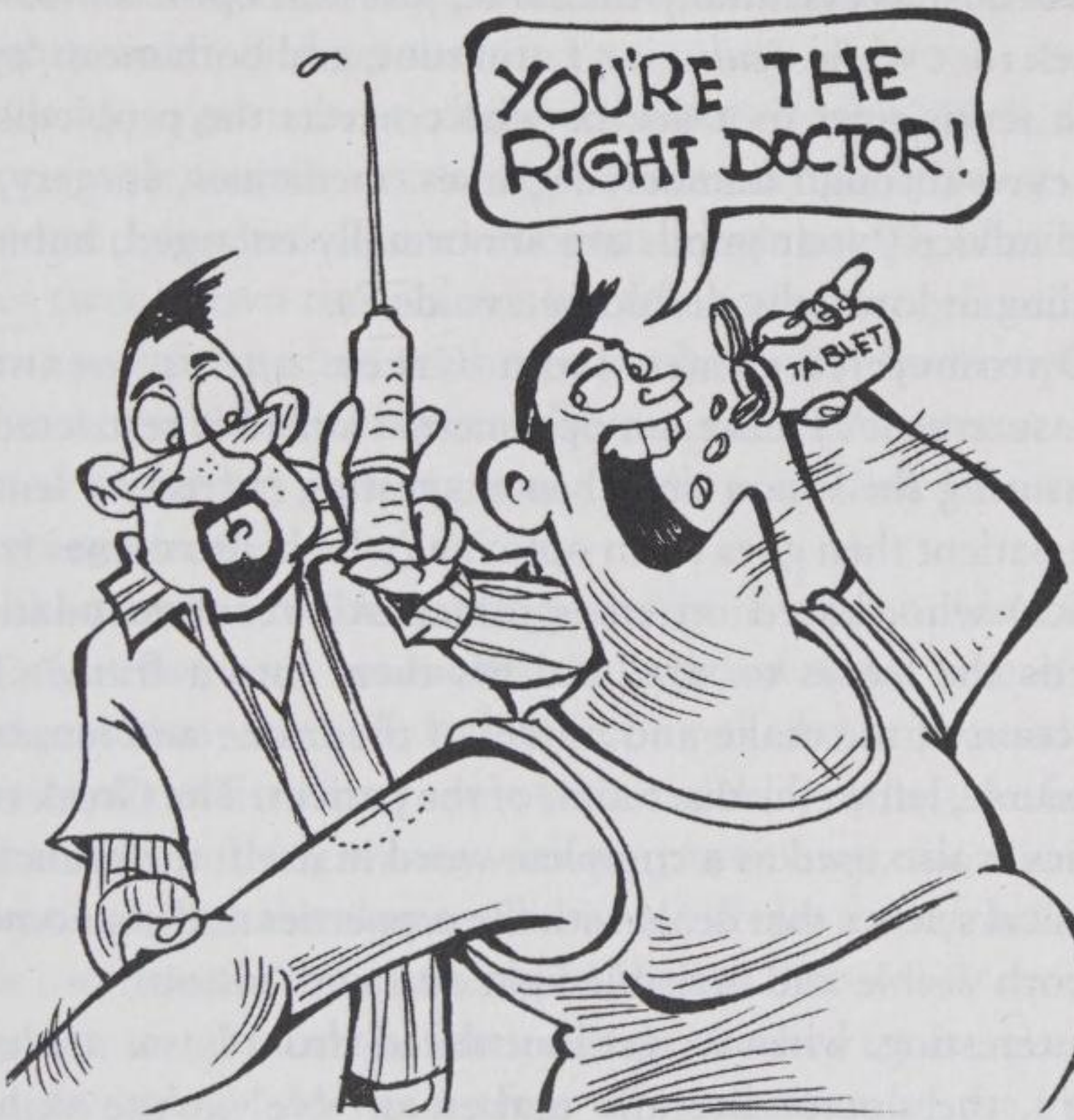
suffer from various phobias, or may continuously worry about his health (specifically, a hypochondriac).

'Pain, right hypochondrium' was what a doctor wrote on the X-ray form. He recollects, 'My patient came into my room angrily, accusing me of not taking his stomach pains seriously and describing him as a hypochondriac. The misunderstanding arose because the word hypochondrium is still used by doctors to describe the right side of the upper abdomen. This is the part of the body that lies below the cartilage of the breastbone, which the ancients believed was the seat of melancholy and responsible for a condition called *hypochondria* (*hypo*—'under' and *chondros*—'cartilage especially of the breastbone'). To them, unexplained and unrelenting illnesses or symptoms presented by patients were put down to a problem due to the organs of the upper abdomen.'

Now, when these hypochondriacs insist that they are ill and a doctor tells them they are not, they brand him a 'quack'. The doctor has to protect his reputation and his practice and, to satisfy their psyche, gives them a medicine, administers an injection or, in extreme cases, and I am hazarding a wild guess, performs an operation. This medicine is usually a simple calcium tablet or a sugar-filled capsule, and the injection is merely a dose of sterilized water in vibrant colours. An operation of this type, if has ever been done (though it is highly improbable), would involve the effort of first making a small incision and then simply **suturing**[24] that incision, accompanied by a list of dos and don'ts for the patient.

[24] **Suturing** means joining of the lips or edges of a wound or the like by stitching or some similar process: *the cut was so small that the doctor decided to apply a tape across the cut instead of suturing it.*

These tablets and injections are known as **placebos**: harmless medicines, with no **pharmacological**[25] effect, given to *please* or satisfy a patient, who believes them to be real. A placebo is also administered to a control group while testing the **efficacy**[26] of a new drug. One can easily associate *placebo* with the word *please* and coincidentally, this word actually originates from the Latin root *placere*—'to please'.



[25] **Pharmacology** is the science dealing with the preparation, uses, and especially the effects of drugs: *we need a pharmacological evidence of the efficacy of the drug before applying for FDA approval.*

[26] **Efficacy** means effectiveness; the capacity for producing a desired result or effect: *the efficacy of the anti-pollution drive was proved when the pollutant levels in the city showed a marked decline.*

After a slight detour from physical to psychological, let us bypass the forehead and eyebrows, and come straight down to the **eyes.** The words associated with eyes always put me off, for even after mugging them over and over again, the confusion between an *ophthalmologist, oculist, optician,* and *optometrist* persisted. I finally dug a little deeper to discover their roots, and now I know that **ophthalmologist** and **oculist** as essentially the same, just that *ophthalmos* is a Greek root while *oculus* is a Latin root, and both mean 'eye'. Both terms refer to a doctor who corrects the problems of the eye—through numbered glasses, medicines, surgery, or kind advice ('your pupils are abnormally enlarged, habit of reading in low light should be avoided').

Optometrist comes from Greek *optics* meaning 'measurement'. Hence, an optometrist's field is restricted to measuring the vision and then suggesting corrective lenses. The patient then goes to an **optician** (which also comes from optics) who, based on an optometrist's recommendation, grinds the lenses to size, and fits them into a frame. The selection of the make and model of the frame and lenses is, of course, left to the discretion of the patient. The Greek root **optics** is also used as a complete word in itself: the branch of physical science that deals with the properties and phenomena of both visible and invisible light and with vision.

Interesting, when we get **inoculated** (from Latin *oculus*—'eye'), the doctor literally makes an 'eye' in the skin to introduce drugs that assist in creating immunity to specific diseases. Some of us, especially children, dread the procedure of inoculation, as it requires facing the **menacing**[27] needle

[27] **Menace** means (1) something that threatens to cause evil, harm, injury, etc.; a threat: air *pollution is a menace to health*; (2) a person whose actions, attitudes, or ideas are considered dangerous or harmful:

piercing our delicate skin to make that 'eye'. Immediately, the lachrymal glands (tear-producing glands located just below our eyes) get into an overdrive, and the calm of the doctor's clinic is destroyed by howls, shrieks and rain. Courtesy the lachrymal glands, English gets the words **lachrymal** and **lachrymose** which mean: *weeping or inclined to weep, tearful.* They also mean something that is causing or generating tears: *our annual family get together was both lachrymal* (or 'lachrymose') *and joyous.*

Can you guess how often we blink our eyes? Well, there is no single correct answer since it actually depends on what you are doing with your eyes open. People usually blink their eyes twenty-two times a minute when they are relaxed, ten times a minute when reading a book, and only seven times a minute when reading text from a computer screen. This is one of the key reasons why people with desk jobs suffer from eyestrain.

I had never thought that eyestrain was responsible for my frequent bouts of headaches that started some time after I had joined my first job. It finally compelled me to consult my family physician. Upon some basic checking, when she found apparently nothing wrong with my physiology, she asked me to see an ophthalmologist. She wrote '*Refer for refraction to rule out myopia*' on a letterhead for me. The word 'myopia' was new to me, and so I immediately checked for its meaning and etymology. **Myopia** refers to a condition of the eye in which the eye cannot clearly see objects that are *far* from the eye. This condition is also called *short-sightedness* or *nearsightedness* since the objects that are *closer* to the eye can

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behind the wheel of a car, he is a real menace; and also (3) an extremely annoying person: *Dennis the Menace.*

be seen distinctly by a myopic. Numbers ranging from 0.25 all the way to 10 denote the degree of defect and a minus (–) sign is prefixed to the numeral.

The dictionary also gave me the opposite of myopia. **Hypermetropia** is a condition where the eye can see the *distant* objects more distinctly than the ones closer to it. In common parlance, it is also called *farsightedness* or *long-sightedness*. The degree of defect is denoted by the same set of numbers as used for myopia with the exception that a plus (+) sign is prefixed to the numeral instead of a minus (–) sign.

While I had promptly noted down these two words in my English diary and revised them a few times, I would still manage to mix up the meanings whenever I sat down to recall my latest word acquisitions. Hence, I devised a simple mnemonic to spare myself this feeling of recurrent failure. Myopia, as a word, is shorter than hypermetropia and, deservedly so, it stands for 'short' or nearsightedness. Hypermetropia, being longer, refers to 'long'-sightedness. To remember that minus sign is prefixed in case of myopia, I simply associated *'M' for Minus and 'M' for Myopia.*

Interestingly, the word myopia has also been adopted into conversational English where it refers to the lack of foresight or **discernment,**[28] or lack of long-term perspective in thinking or planning. It also suggests narrow-mindedness and intolerance: *the decision to not relocate a village near a large coal mine for setting up a steel plant was a clear case of political myopia*. Similarly, its synonyms *short-sighted* or *nearsighted* are also used in a figurative sense to mean lack of foresight or discernment.

[28] **Discernment** means keenness of insight and judgement: *it is difficult to discern the motivations of all employees in a corporation.*

Unlike myopia, hypermetropia has not developed any figurative usage, though its synonyms *farsighted* and *long-sighted* are used figuratively to mean: displaying **foresight**[29] (care or provision for the future or the ability to see outcomes of current actions in the future).

Let us move down from our eyes to the **nose**. Isn't it funny that our small external air filter has a big connection with the wild and **burly**[30] rhinoceros? I am sure that with the media coverage beauty and wellness industry gets these days, you would not have missed repeated references to the rich and famous going under the **scalpel**[31] for nose correction jobs. Medically, this surgery is called **rhinoplasty**. Well, the Greek root *rhin*—'nose'—is what binds a rhinoceros and our humble nose. Rhinos are large, thick-skinned, herbivorous mammals, having one or two upright **horns** on the snout, and their name is derived from the two most prominent features of their **physiognomy**[32] (*rhin*—'nose' and *keras*—'horn').

No one ever escapes a common cold, it is so common. Ask a doctor to define it and he will say: inflammation of the mucous **membrane**[33] of the nose, marked especially by persistent watery

[29] Note the minor difference in spelling of *foresight* and *far-sight*.

[30] **Burly** means big and strong; heavy and muscular; stout: *a big burly farmer*.

[31] **Scalpel** is a small, light, usually straight knife used in surgical operations.

[32] **Physiognomy** means face or countenance: *he didn't have any independent political physiognomy and veered towards any party where he saw an opportunity of personal gain*.

[33] **Membrane** means (1) any thin sheet of material and (2) a sheet or layer of animal or vegetable tissue that covers or lines an organ, or connects plant and animal organs or cells. This word comes from Latin *membrana*—'parchment', which further comes from Latin *membrum*—'limb, member of the body'. Etymologically, it is a thin layer of skin that covers the members of the body.

mucus discharge, nasal congestion, itching, and sneezing. Ask him to write down a prescription for it and he will start with Rx—**Rhinitis**, the medical name for common cold.

Imagine an individual with a prominent nose. Also imagine that he or she is unduly, insistently, offensively curious and inquisitive about the affairs of others. Naturally, this individual can't help but intrude into your meetings and discussions. This trait is referred to by the term **nosy** and this person is called a **nosy parker**; possibly inspired by the observation that his big nose smells any opportunity to satiate his curiosity about the affairs of others.

Now why don't you go to the mirror and look at yourself. Do you appear any different from what you looked like yesterday? No! But medically, yes. Attempt to hold your nose if you possibly can, for your nose keeps growing throughout life!

Well, this medical fact partly explains why in most elderly people, the nose looks more prominent. The other reason is that in old age, the **countenance**[34] is usually a **mickle**[35] of wrinkles, cheeks are not as firm and full as they were in youth, hence the nose stands out. While at it, it is pertinent to note that every time we breathe, we inhale 125 million dust particles—in a lifetime, our nose filters out 23 kg of dust!

The English language has a weird word to describe the sense of smell: **olfactory**. I memorized this word by creating a

[34] **Countenance** means (1) appearance, especially the expression of the face: *the question left him with a puzzled countenance*; (2) facial features or visage; and (3) a look or expression indicative of encouragement, moral support, or approval.

[35] **Mickle** (used mainly in Scottish and Northern English) means a large amount or number: *he had a mickle of nickels in his pocket*. It also forms a popular proverb 'many a little makes a mickle'.

mnemonic that originated in my own nose! From as far back as I can remember, a gentle squeeze of my nose and several globules of fat **squirt**[36] out. The joke in the family was that my nose was an 'oil factory'. Little did I realize then that I was predestined to fall in love with mnemonics, given I was living with one.

I recollect a bizarre association between the lack of sexual maturity and the absence of the sense of smell. Apparently, the cells that **orchestrate**[37] our sexual development and reproduction begin their life in the nose. These nerve cells release a hormone called Luteinizing Hormone Releasing Hormone (LHRH), which stimulates the pituitary gland situated at the base of the brain to release hormones called **gonadotropins.**[38] These, in turn, trigger the maturation and functioning of the sexual organs and set **puberty**[39] in motion. This new knowledge at last offers some answers to a baffling disease called **Kallmann syndrome.** Children with this disease don't make enough LHRH to develop sexually and most can't *smell.*

[36] **Squirt** means to spray liquid in a jet from a narrow hole or to eject a spurt of liquid: *the lemon squirted in my eye as I tried to cut it with a knife.* It also means to wet with a liquid or viscous substance: *the kids squirted the poor pup with a hose.*

[37] **Orchestrate** means to compose or arrange music for performance by an orchestra. It also means to manipulate through clever and thorough planning: *he orchestrated a coup and put the incumbent President behind bars.*

[38] **Gonadotropins** are hormones that stimulate the growth and activity of the gonads, and especially denote any of the several pituitary hormones that stimulate the function of the ovaries and testes.

[39] **Puberty** is the age at which a person is first capable of sexual reproduction of offspring: in common law, presumed to be fourteen years in the male and twelve years in the female.

After nosing around the oil factory, let us get into our **teeth** and explore if this set of potentially thirty-two bones can contribute something worthwhile to our learning. But before we proceed with this exploration, let us get a booster shot of trivia. In the 1950s, Lever Brothers Company (that had, in 1944, taken over Pepsodent Co., manufacturers of toothbrushes and tooth-cleaning products) moved into south-east Asia and began an aggressive advertising campaign for Pepsodent toothpaste promising whiter teeth. Sales were dismal. An investigation was commissioned. It was discovered that the inhabitants of the area enjoyed chewing betel nut, which stained the teeth. Betel nut was expensive. The richer the locals, the blacker their teeth. No one wanted whiter teeth! ☺

Did you know that our ancestors possessed larger jaws and hence more teeth than us? These days, while standard textbooks will teach you to expect adult human jaws to contain thirty-two teeth, most people do not have sufficient room in their jawline to easily accommodate all of them, and hence suffer from an **impacted**[40] third (and the last) molar (also called **wisdom tooth**). The reason for this shrinkage lies in evolution. Over generations, we have changed our diet from a raw, coarse diet (demanding on the teeth to bite and chew) to a more cooked and soft diet. By the way, the third molars are called wisdom teeth because they usually erupt when a person is between seventeen and twenty-five years or older, old enough to have supposedly gained wisdom.

[40] **Impacted** means densely populated or crowded, tightly packed. In dentistry, it refers to a tooth that is so confined in (or to) its socket that it is incapable of normal eruption.

What are people's usual complaints about their teeth? Misalignments, cavities, lifting of gums, halitosis . . . **Halitosis** means bad breath and can definitely disappear with regular brushing and use of mouthwash. For other ailments, you will have to visit a specialist. Incidentally, one easy way to remember the word halitosis is by rhyming it with roses: *the sweet smell of roses is such a contrast to halitosis*.

If your gums are giving you a problem, go to a **periodontist** (from Greek *peri*—'around' as in 'perimeter' and *dontia*—'teeth'). This is an apt name for this specialization since gums are located *around* our teeth. If you want to get your teeth aligned and straightened, you can visit an **orthodontist** (from Greek *orthos*—'straight'). For deep-rooted cavities, you must see an **endodontist,** who can do a root canal. An endodontist specializes in the diseases of the dental pulp and nerve (from *endo*—'inside', 'within'). If you have lost your teeth to an infection or an accident and need to get a set of artificial teeth, consult a **prosthodontist** (from Greek *prosthesis*—'addition'). A prosthodontist deals with the replacement of missing teeth and related mouth or jaw structures, by using bridges, dentures, and other artificial devices. For simple teeth extraction, polishing or filling of shallow cavities, there is no specialist. A regular dentist can take care of these.

Prosthesis is a complete word in itself and refers to the artificial replacement of the missing or non-functioning body parts. It can either be functional or cosmetic and can be attached to the body externally or implanted surgically. The branch of surgery that deals with the production and fitment of artificial body parts is known as **prosthetics**. In the broadest sense, the area of prosthetics refers not only to artificial limbs, joint replacements, heart valves and dentures,

but also to hearing aids of various kinds, pacemakers and implants.[41]

I am sure most of you are familiar with the different types of our teeth. The four teeth in front are called **incisors**: teeth for cutting and **gnawing**.[42] This word comes from Latin *in*—'into' and *caedere*—'to cut'. The same roots also form words like *incision* and *incisive*. **Incision** is a cut or a gash. It also means cutting into, especially for surgical purposes: *the medical student made an incision on the abdomen of a mouse to examine its internal organs*. **Incisive** means cutting, biting, or penetrating: *the incisive tone of the teacher*. The word *incisive* used figuratively means sharp, keen, and remarkably clear: *an incisive summary of the complex issue*.

After the four incisors, there is a lone **canine** tooth on either side (named after canidae, a family of mammals, including dogs, jackals, wolves, and foxes, since this tooth is prominent in these animals), followed by two **premolars** and three **molars** on either side. Molar (from Latin *molere*—'to grind') is the *grinding* tooth, since its primary function is to grind and chew the food.

Will you be surprised if I tell you about the strong link that exists between our **emoluments** (wages or perquisites gained through employment as compensation for labour) and our molars? Emolument derives from *emolumentum*,

[41] The medical reasons for the **use of prosthesis** include congenital absence of body parts, other birth defects, trauma, amputation, radical surgery (often for cancer), disease, burns, and arthritis.

[42] **Gnaw** means to bite or chew on, especially persistently. It also means to wear away or remove by persistent biting or nibbling: *it is a medical fact that the teeth of all rodents (like rabbit, mouse, beaver, etc.) never stop growing and hence they need to regularly gnaw on fabric, wood, stones, etc. to grind them to their original size.*

originally a sum paid to the miller for *grinding* corn or wheat. Emolumentum further originated from *emolere*—'grind out'. Incidentally, the word **mallet**: a small rubber or wooden or copper hammer, also owes its origin to the same root. These mallets are used when a softer blow is called for, than that delivered by a steel hammer. It is also used in the kitchen to tenderize or flatten meat.

Moving on, let us come to the **beard** and start with some trivia on the apparatus used to chop it. Did you know that the safety razor was invented by King Camp Gillette? When it first went on sale in 1903, only fifty-one razors and 168 blades were sold. At first it appeared as if his contraption was a dud. However, sales picked up dramatically the following year—and rose to a staggering 90,000 razors and 1,24,00,000 blades!

Here's something interesting about shaving. It is a medical fact that it's not the shaving cream that softens the beard but the water that does the trick! Water molecules trapped inside the lather (foam) invade the bonds in the keratin protein that make our hair, weakening them considerably, and thus allow easy shaving. But there is a catch—the minimum reaction time for this process of weakening to commence is three minutes. Even a second less and all the efforts will come to naught. It appears that Albert Einstein had reached the same conclusion merely by observation, even though this fact had not been scientifically proven during his time. Hence he did not believe in using shaving soap and only shaved with warm water.

Since we have been talking about matters of personal hygiene, let us explore if besides getting clean, we can glean some new English vocabulary.

A **five o'clock shadow** is the name for the minute impressions of hair that sprout up by the evening in case

you have shaved in the morning. But what if you decide to stay without a shave for two to three days at a stretch? The rough, short growth of beard that starts to show and itch is a **stubble**. Stubble is also used to denote the short stubs of wheat, barley, sugarcane, etc. left in the field after the crop has been harvested.

Moving further down, let us skip the shoulders and the throat (since I have frequently suffered its **maladies**[43] in the form of chronic tonsillitis) and come to the **hands**. Hands, for a long time, carried the burden of earning one's livelihood, and the skills vested in them served to differentiate earning capacities. As economies shifted from agrarian to industrial and then to services, hands lost their pre-eminent position to the mind, but not before enriching our vocabulary.

It is interesting to note that since a majority of people are right-handed (approximately 90 per cent to 93 per cent), we have, over many generations, come to believe that there is something not right in being left-handed. So much so that a left-handed person is often thought to be less skilled and, by some generous extension, even lacking social polish and tact. This is the basis of the word **gauche,** which means clumsy, awkward, tactless, and lacking social polish. No points for guessing that *gauche* comes from French for 'left'.

Similarly, **sinister** (from Latin *sinister*—'on the left-hand side') evolved into its current meaning (evil or treacherous, especially in a mysterious way; threatening; ominous: *a sinister glance; a sinister remark*) as anything on the left-

[43] **Malady** is any disorder or disease of the body, especially one that is chronic or deep-seated. It also means any undesirable condition: *the government and NGOs are working to eliminate social maladies like child marriage, child labour and dowry.*

hand side was considered by Roman **augurs**[44] to be unlucky, unfavourable, even injurious.

The opposite of sinister is **dexter** (Latin *dexter*—'on the right side', also 'favourable') which developed a connotation of skill and gave birth to words like **dexterous**[45] or **dexterity**, which mean skill or adroitness in using hands, body, and even mind: *it was a stunning display of vocal dexterity, with music ranging from deeply sacred to very profane.*

However, can we forget people who are equally skilled in the use of both hands? They are called **ambidextrous** (*ambi*—'both') implying thereby that they use both their hands skilfully, as if both were their *right* hands!

Let us leave the peripheries and come back to the 'trunk' of our body. Our **chest** (medically called 'thorax') extends from the neck to the abdomen, and contains the cavity (enclosed and protected by the ribs and sternum) that holds our heart and lungs. **Chest** is also a box, with a lid, usually used for storage of valuables. It is also a place where the funds of a charitable organization or a public institution are kept, and sometimes even used to refer to the funds themselves.

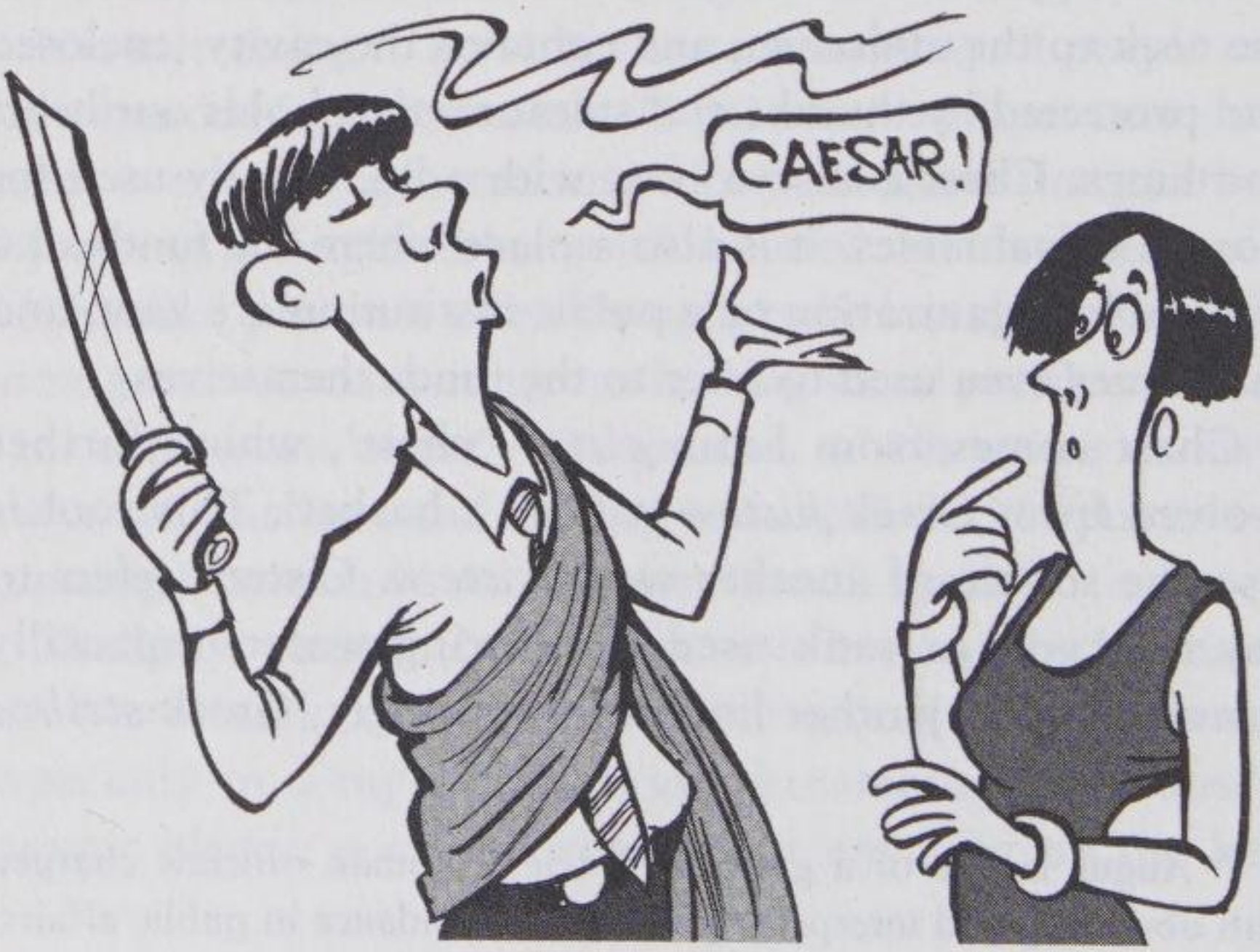
Chest comes from Latin *cista*—'chest', which further evolved from Greek *kiste*—'a box, a basket'. This root is also the source of another word *cistern*. **Cistern** refers to any reservoir or tank used for storing water, especially rainwater or any other liquid. Interestingly, Greek *stethos*

[44] **Augur** is one of a group of ancient Roman officials charged with observing and interpreting omens for guidance in public affairs; soothsayer; prophet. As a verb, augur means (1) to predict from signs and omens; to foretell and (2) to serve as an omen or promise of: *mounting sales augur a profitable year.*

[45] Some popular synonyms of dexterous are adroit and deft.

also means 'chest' and forms the word **stethoscope**, an instrument used to **auscultate**[46] sounds primarily from chest and abdomen.

Let's explore a very interesting scientific fact regarding an organ that is hidden inside our chest—the lung. By a strange coincidence, the number of molecules of air in **one lungful** of air is close to the **number of lungful equivalents** of air in the entire atmosphere. Meteorologists sometimes employ this fact as an illustration (commonly referred to as Caesar's Last Breath) to explain the phenomenon of circulation of air in our atmosphere. It so happens that as Julius Caesar exhaled for the last time, when he was stabbed by Brutus and associates over 2000 years ago, the particles of air in that lungful would



[46] **Auscultation** is medical term for the act of listening to the sounds within the body, either directly or through a stethoscope, to arrive at a diagnosis.

have had enough time to evenly disperse around the globe. Hence, every time we inhale, it is extremely likely that we inhale one particle of air that was exhaled by Caesar in his last breath!

Moving on, instead of travelling down from the chest, we will take a detour to the left towards our **heart**. Heart is *kardia* in Greek, which gives us **cardiac**: belonging to the *heart*. We see its usage in a hospital's *cardiac care* wards or in *cardiac arrest*, which means arresting (*stopping*) of the heart, a common cause of death in humans these days. Typically, in touristic locales, love is confessed to the tree trunks and monument walls as 'Nitin ♥ Natasha'. This shape of the heart, which is used as a substitute for 'loves' in this declaration (supposedly giving it romantic colour), is called a **cardioid**.

We involve our heart in many things—from racing heartbeats when we are about to see our heartthrobs to heartbreaks when we don't want to see them ever again, to medical changes in its condition that necessitate seeing a cardiologist. **Cardiologist** (the additional root *logos* means 'study') is a heart specialist who treats all the medical conditions and wherever heart surgery is required, refers the patient to a cardiothoracic and vascular surgeon. The cardiologist may sometimes recommend an ECG (electrocardiogram) for the patient. The output (*the tracings of the heartbeat*) of this ECG is known as a **cardiograph** (Greek *graphein*—'to write').

The Latin root of heart *cordis* gives us **cordial**: hearty, warm, sincere, friendly, courteous, gracious: *he gave us a cordial reception*. It also gives us **accord** (Latin *ac*—'to') which is an agreement between two or more people or nations, literally harmony of 'hearts'. **Discord** (*dis*—'away') is quite the opposite of accord since our 'hearts' are apart. Similarly, there is **record** (*re*—'again'), which literally means

'by hearting' something by going over it again and again. This practice originated before the advent of writing when records had to be passed on from person to person, from one to the other generation, by word of mouth and hence, had to be learnt by 'heart'.

Before the advent of telecommunications, the heart also came to the rescue of people who wanted to be instantly connected. Surprised? These people, separated by distance, took the help of telepathy. **Telepathy** (from Greek *tele*—'far' and *pathos*—'feeling') means communication of feelings, thoughts, or desires between two people without the use of normal senses (speech, sight, hearing, touch) or telecommunication apparatus, and involving mechanisms that cannot be understood in terms of known scientific laws: *mothers usually have a telepathic sense of when their kids are in trouble.* Incidentally, **pathology**, a branch of medicine that studies the origin, nature, course and consequences of diseases, also owes its name to the root *pathos*, but from its second meaning 'disease or suffering'. Pathology also studies any deviation from a healthy, normal or efficient condition of the human body.

Given that the root *pathos* has multiple meanings ('feeling, disease, and suffering'), it is natural they will lend themselves to many words. Let us merely sample its first meaning 'feeling'.

When you **sympathize** with someone, you try to share his or her 'feelings' (*sym*—'together'). These feelings are usually filled with pity and sorrow: *we sympathize with people whose homes were ravaged in the recent typhoon.* When you have a strong or deep dislike for somebody, your feelings are that of **antipathy** (from *anti*—'opposite'): *considering the public's general antipathy toward politics, it is not surprising that this*

profession has managed to attract some young and bright talent in recent times.

There is a third state too when you neither *sympathize* with someone, nor have any *antipathy* towards them, which is when you are **apathetic** (from *a*—'without'), i.e. 'without' feelings: *due to the consistent poor performance of the national soccer team, he was apathetic to the outcome of the tri-nation series.* Another good example—*wonder why people are apathetic about voting?*

When you can identify with and understand another person's feelings and situation, you have **empathy** for them: *having gone through similar trauma myself, I could easily empathize with what he was going through.* There is also a set of people who are not steady or stable with their feelings, affections, or attachments and keep changing their minds quite erratically. These people are called **fickle** or **capricious**.

From heart, let us move down and a little right to the liver. The liver manufactures a secretion called bile and I was quite surprised to discover a link between this hormone and the word **humour**. Baffling, isn't it? Allow me to unravel this mystery for you. Humour, besides its conventional meaning, is also used to refer to fluids or semi-fluids (such as blood or lymph) in the human body. This also explains how *humour* and *humid* have a common root.

❖ As per ancient belief, there are four fluids in the body whose *balance* or *relative proportion* determine our emotional and physical state, our health, and our *temperament* (Latin *temperamentum*—'mixture'). These humours are *blood, phlegm, yellow bile*, and *black bile.*

- If there is excess of *blood*, then our temperament is **sanguine** (from Latin *sanguis*—'blood'), which, as discussed earlier in this chapter, means positive and optimistic.
- If there is an excess of *phlegm* (sputum), we are not easily excited to action or display of emotion, and we have a calm and sluggish temperament. To put it crisply, we are **phlegmatic**. I could easily relate to it, as right from childhood, I have been a perennial sufferer of common cold and a phlegm producing machine. During these bouts of common cold, I would be completely drained out and **sluggish**.[47]
- If the concentration of *yellow bile* is more, we see the world through a **bilious**[48] eye. Bile is *chole* in Latin and hence bilious has a synonym in the word **choleric**—extremely irritable or easily angered, irascible: *a choleric disposition, a choleric outburst*.
- If there is excess of *black bile*, our state is defined by the word **melancholy**. It means that we are in a gloomy, mournful, and a depressed state of mind, especially when it is habitual or prolonged. Melancholy also means sober thoughtfulness, pensiveness: *our mood was melancholic after watching the extensive coverage of the train accident on the television*. Melancholy originates from Greek *melancholía*—'condition

[47] **Sluggish** means lacking energy, vigour, lazy, moving slowly: *a heavy afternoon meal made me sluggish*; *running extremely heavy applications can make a computer sluggish*. An excellent mnemonic for this word is a slow-moving slug!

[48] **Bilious** means (1) related to bile or an excess secretion of bile, (2) relating to, characterized by, or experiencing gastric distress caused by a disorder of the liver or gall bladder, and (3) peevish, irritable, cranky, ill-humoured, unpleasant, distasteful: *the child's bilious vomiting made the doctor investigate further to rule out intestinal obstruction*.

of having black bile' (from Greek *melas* and eventually Sanskrit *malinah*—'black, dirty, stained' + *chole*—'bile').

- In reality, while blood, phlegm, and yellow bile do exist in our bodies, there is no evidence of fluid that resembles black bile. Hence, it appears to be a misconception of the ancient **physiologists**.[49] They believed that either the kidney or the spleen secreted this humour.
- As per this theory, any imbalance in the composition of these four humours would lead to abnormal behaviour by a person. This abnormal or odd behaviour suffered some permutations and led to the current definition of humour i.e. comedy, wit, something that creates fun and laughter mainly from the oddities of life.

I am sure you found this connection between humidity and comedy quite hilarious. Humour undoubtedly adds a lot of colour to our lives and, surprisingly, this tale of four humours can also unravel the secrets of the colour of our skin, our hair, even our eyes. Actually, this one is quite simple and straightforward. **Melanin** is a group of black, dark or reddish brown, or yellow pigments found in the hair, skin, and eyes of humans and other animals, and the extent of this pigment and its relative composition determines their colour. Melanin shares its root with melancholy and derives from Greek *melas* and eventually Sanskrit *malinah*—'black, dirty, stained'.

We now come to the **abdomen**. The word abdomen is often used synonymously for stomach, however, abdomen

[49] **Physiologist** is a specialist in physiology, the branch of biology dealing with the functions and activities of living organisms and their parts, including all physical and chemical processes.

includes, besides the stomach, all the other organs between the diaphragm and pelvis, i.e. liver, spleen, kidneys, pancreas, and the intestines. Organs in the abdomen combined with those in the thoracic cavity (lungs, heart etc.) and the pelvic cavity (bladder, uterus, rectum, etc.) are collectively called **visceral** organs (from Latin *viscera*—'the soft internal organs of the body').[50] Outside medicine, **visceral** means characterized by or dealing with coarse or base emotions, earthy: *a visceral literary style*. It also means proceeding from instinct rather than intellect: *a visceral reaction*.

From among the visceral organs, let us pick up the **spleen** to help us in our journey of word acquisitions. Spleen gives us the word **splenetic**, which means spitefully stern, peevish, marked by ill humour or irritability. This association with the spleen is due to an ancient belief that the spleen is the seat of temper in humans: *no longer able to handle his repeated splenetic outbursts, the class boycotted him en masse.*

Let us now move over to some interesting facts on our **stomach**. The digestive acids in the stomach are strong enough to dissolve even a metal like zinc. If you are wondering how these acids do not invade and dissolve the stomach lining, the truth is they do. But the trick is that the cells in the lining of the stomach are renewed so quickly (5,00,000 cells per minute and the entire lining every three days), that the acids simply don't get enough time to dissolve the lining.

After stomach, let us pick a pelvic organ. The Greek word for uterus was *hystera* (now I know why the surgical removal of the uterus is called *hysterectomy*). It is believed that this organ may have led to the English word **hysteria**.

[50] The chemical composition of visceral organs forms a very important part in forensic investigations into causes of unnatural death.

In ancient times, it was usual to associate certain illnesses or abnormal mental states to specific organs of the body (as we have already seen in the genesis of the word hypochondria). Since women were considered emotionally less stable than men, the cause of hysteria (an uncontrollable outburst of emotion or fear, often characterized by irrationality, laughter, weeping) was attributed to hystera (uterus), a purely feminine organ.

Hysteria is no longer the exclusive preserve of women, but there are several other medical ailments and disorders associated with the female reproductive system. **Gynaecologist** (from Greek *gyne*—'female') is the medical specialist who handles all such ailments and disorders.

Let us halt our progress down the body for a while and welcome the speciality of **somnology** that remedies sleep disorders and irregularities. Somnology comes from Latin *somnus*—'to sleep' and its biggest challenge is to cure people of **insomnia,** a condition of prolonged sleeplessness. Affected by insomnia (doctors say it has psychological origins), a person may stay awake for days, months or even years at a stretch.

Marilyn Monroe was an insomniac and frequently took **soporifics**[51] to sleep. Over the years, her insomnia steadily grew worse until her death, which was supposedly due to an overdose of sleeping pills. Other famous insomniacs include

[51] **Soporifics** are medicines that induce sleep. At times, the word *sedative* is also used in connection with such drugs. **Sedatives** have a much broader action, as they calm or soothe a person. They reduce irritability, relieve pain and lower functional activity. Hence, when a person is sedated, it also helps the person go to sleep. We also have **sedate,** which means calm, composed and unexcited: *a sedate person or a sedate ceremony*.

Charles Dickens, Margaret Thatcher, Napoleon, Thomas Edison and Vincent Van Gogh.

While insomniacs may need to resort to sedatives or soporifics, some people simply love sleeping and can go to sleep almost anytime and anywhere. Factory worker Albert Ferstrurber overslept every day and was sacked in Salzburg Austria because he was always late. He appealed to an industrial court claiming that the firm had given him an employment contract. He lost his case when he didn't turn up for hearing in the court—he had overslept![52] ☺

Another interesting sleep disorder is **somnambulism** (Latin *ambulare*—'to walk'); well, a somnambulist is a person who has this peculiar habit of walking in his or her sleep.[53] Note that a somnambulist doesn't differentiate between broad daylight and moonlight; he or she can go sleepwalking any time of the day. However, a specific type of somnambulist only gets active when the whole world (except for insomniacs and students determined to crack the competitive examinations) is in deep slumber. This person is called a **noctambulist** and this word comes from Latin *noctus*—'night' and *ambulare*. My friend Alok is one such specimen though, in his case, it happens only once in a while.

Incidentally, Alok is also on a perennial dieting programme and this is a lethal combination as he recently discovered. He and his wife Neelima were celebrating their ten years of togetherness and had planned a big party at their home. Naturally, the refrigerator was stocked to the brim with the choicest delicacies. Coincidentally, Alok's noctambulism got triggered the previous night and while still in deep sleep,

[52] *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 4 March 1992.

[53] **Somnus** was the Roman god of sleep.

he went straight to the refrigerator. The refrigerator lost a substantial stock of delicacies. The theft was realized only in the morning, and Neelima raised a hue and cry over this invasion. Poor Alok passionately pleaded: 'Believe me, believe me, I haven't done it!' The funny thing is that he was as completely ignorant as his wife was confident that he was the culprit.

While we are done with key sleep disorders, there are some other words from the Latin root *somnus* that are waiting to be explored. A person in a **somnolent** state is almost asleep and, if left undisturbed even for a few minutes, should be fast asleep. Poor George, who suffers from insomnia and therefore on medication, is surprisingly in a somnolent state today after many days, when he unfortunately gets woken up by his caring wife—'*Hey George! You forgot to take your sleeping pill!*'

Somniferous (Latin *fero*—'to bring') refers to anything that induces sleep. It could be a **lullaby**[54] for children, sedatives for some people, and a few pages of a non-fiction title after a heavy meal for others. Earlier, an exclusive domain of moms, these days even dads are heard singing lullabies quite **mellifluously**.[55]

Coming back to the word somnambulist, where the root ambulo—'to walk' combines with somnus to ensure that poor Alok suffers repeated failures at dieting. Let us see if this root defines some other characteristic walking styles.

Amble is to move at an easy pace: *a couple ambled in the garden with their baby sleeping peacefully in the pram.*

[54] **Lullaby** is a soft gentle song sung to make a child go to sleep.

[55] **Mellifluous** means sweet-sounding, sweetly or smoothly flowing: *a mellifluous voice.*

Incidentally, the word 'pram' also comes from the same root. It doesn't get obvious unless you discover that this word has been condensed from the original word **perambulator** (from Latin *prae*, *pre*—'before, earlier, prior to' and *ambulo*—'to walk'), a four-wheeled apparatus to take children for a walk before they learn to walk on their own two feet.

The word **ambulatory** also means to be able to walk; however, this term is generally used for hospitalized patients who are not completely bed-ridden and can walk around. **Ambulance** also comes from the same root but I am sure none of you needs any explanation for this word. But what's an ambulance chaser? A lawyer on the lookout for accidents to **instigate**[56] action for damages!

Since we have already digressed from our journey from head to toe, let us use this opportunity to explore the largest organ of our body—our skin. The specialist who treats skin diseases is a **dermatologist** (Greek *derma*—'skin'), and while there are several different types of skin diseases like psoriasis, scabies, pyoderma, etc., any general inflammation or infection or irritation of the skin is referred to by the term **dermatitis**. We think of skin as one piece but doctors slice the skin into multiple layers—epidermis, hypodermis, dermis, etc.

Epidermis comes from Greek *epi*—'on' and refers to the outermost layer of skin tissue, the one that in humans replaces itself completely, through periodic shedding, once every four weeks. **Hypodermis** come from Greek *hypo*—'under' and generally refers to the area under the skin. You may have heard of hypodermic needles, so named, as they inject the

[56] **Instigate** is to provoke, incite, or foment some action or course: *to instigate a quarrel*; *to instigate the people to revolt*.

drug *under* the skin (subcutaneously). **Subcutaneous** itself comes from *sub*—'under' and Latin *cutis*—'skin'.

The root *derma* combines with Greek *pakhus*—'thick' to give us **pachyderms**, thick-skinned animals of the likes of rhinoceros, hippopotamus, elephant, etc. The word is also used in a figurative sense to refer to a person who is not sensitive to criticism or ridicule, as he is thick-skinned. Are you wondering why I forgot crocodiles and alligators? I did not and had dutifully mentioned them as examples. However, they were struck off during the editorial review as factually incorrect information. I was told that it is the scales on their skin that gives this impression and they don't qualify as pachyderms. Imagine a 'taxi' stuffed with animal 'skins' and you have your visual mnemonic for a **taxidermist**, the person who prepares and preserves the animal skins and stuffs and mounts them to make them lifelike.

While delving on the subject of *derma*, let me mention that researchers have found pig's skin to be the most suitable substitute for human skin grafts or transplants. And by the way, the word **graft**, besides transplant, also means *bribe*.

After our discussion on skin, which covers us from outside as well as shields our internal organs, let us explore the all-pervasive fluid that carries nutrients to all organs and transports their waste as well. The name of the fluid is a no-brainer and its Latin root *haima* is actually the one that contributes medical words associated with blood. **Haematology** is the study of the nature, function, and diseases of the blood and of blood-forming organs like bone marrow. It may interest you to know that it takes sixty seconds for the complete circulation of blood in our body. **Haemorrhage** refers to the extravasation (discharge, escape) of blood into the tissues due to the bursting of blood vessels. People

generally associate haemorrhage with the brain, but it could actually occur anywhere in the body.

Haemophilia is a medical condition where the blood loses its property of clotting and, therefore, any internal or external rupture of blood vessels can lead to uncontrolled loss of blood, even death. It is a quirk of nature that only males can be haemophilic; although females are carriers, this condition never manifests itself in them. It is said that Queen Victoria was a haemophilia carrier, and when her children were married into royal households in France, Germany, and Russia, the disease spread across the world.

Let us move on to the organs that give us our structure and the strength to carry our weight. The specialty of **orthopaedics** deals with correction of deformities of the skeletal system especially bones, spine, ligaments, and muscles. Orthopaedics comes from Greek *orthos*—'straight' and *paideia*—'child rearing'. I questioned the etymological absurdity of this word. What possible connection could anyone establish between child rearing, straight position, and this medical speciality? I was relieved to discover that there is no direct association between the two but that is only insofar as the modern avatar of this speciality is concerned. I had to delve a bit into history to understand the etymological reference. Its origin dates back to the eighteenth century when French physician Nicholas Andry first used this term in 1741 in his book on the prevention and correction of muscular and skeletal deformities in children.

Early orthopaedists were physicians who used to literally *straighten* children of their birth defects like scoliosis (abnormal sideways curvature of the spine) or clubfoot (a deformity where the foot is curled or twisted). Gradually orthopaedists started treating fractures, dislocations, and

trauma to the spine and the skeleton system. However, for many years, it remained a non-operative speciality. Orthopaedists **manipulated**[57] bones and joints to restore alignment and then applied casts and braces to maintain the alignment until the injury healed. Fractures of the hip, among other injuries, were considered untreatable and hence ignored. It was only in the 1930s when a special nail was developed to hold bone fragments together to speed up the healing and a metal replacement of the head of the femur (thigh bone) was created to cure hip fractures (since it would often not heal once fractured), that it became a surgical speciality.[58]

Let us move down from the head of femur to the end of tibia and fibula (the bones in the lower leg) and welcome our feet. I knew only a couple of words that were derived from feet—one was a rather romantic word **footsie**, which means to touch feet or rub knees in a **caressing**[59] way under the table, and the other was **foot**, a unit of measurement.

Podiatrist is a specialist qualified to diagnose and treat foot disorders. A close associate of a podiatrist is a **chiropodist** or **chiropractor** (from Greek cheir—'hand'), a specialist who treats diseases of the hands and feet, especially one who

[57] **Manipulate** means to handle, manage, control, operate or use skilfully, usually with hands, some process of treatment or performance. It also means to temper with or falsify for personal gain or manage shrewdly, especially in an unfair manner: *he tried to manipulate stock prices.*

[58] www.scienceclarified.com/Oi-Ph/Orthopedics.html, last accessed on 12 September 2012

[59] **Caress** is an act or a gesture to express affection, usually with an embrace or a kiss. As a verb, it means to touch or stroke in an affectionate or loving manner: *the gentle caress of the waves on the shore and you beside me—could I ask for more?*

removes corns and **bunions.**[60] I am familiar with a corn, having endured one all these years on my left foot. However, I struggled to describe it scientifically. So I dug into a dictionary and was literally bowled over with the explanation: 'Corn is a horny *induration* or *callosity* of the epidermis, usually with a central core, formed especially on the toes or feet and caused by undue pressure or friction.'

I didn't follow a few words (which I have italicized) but was surprised to learn that the root of this corn is not the same as that of the corn we eat. The corn of the edible variety comes from Latin *granum*—'grain'. The horny hardening of the **cuticle**[61] of the toes and feet (commonly called 'corn') comes from Latin *cornū*—'horn', also the source of cornucopia (*cōpiae*—'plenty').

In ancient mythology, cornucopia meant a horn containing food, drink, etc. 'in endless supply'[62] and is said to have been a horn of the goat Amalthaea, the goat that suckled **Zeus.**[63] Now, it refers to something or anything in abundance or profusion.

It would be fitting to round up this discussion that began with the harbingers of life on this earth with some research on old age. The Greek root *geras* signifies 'old age' and *geron*, an

[60] **Bunion** is a localized painful inflamed swelling at either the medial or dorsal aspect of the first joint of the big toe, caused by an inflamed bursa. Why don't you check the meanings of the underlined words in the dictionary to better understand this explanation?

[61] **Cuticle** is the non-living epidermis that surrounds the edges of the fingernail or toenail.

[62] I am tempted to say 'in copious quantities' given the word 'copious' also comes from the same root *cōpiae*—'plenty'.

[63] **Zeus** is the principal god of the Greek pantheon, ruler of the heavens, and father of other gods and mortal heroes.

'old person'. Hence **geriatrics** (with the additional Greek root *iatreia*—'medical healing') is a medical speciality that deals with the medical problems of the elderly. And **gerontology** is a branch of psychology that deals with the psychological and emotional problems of the old people. Someone rightly said—'If life were just, we would have been born old and saved enough by the time we had attained our youth.'

There are two more roots that signify 'old age'—Latin *vetus*, which explains **veteran** and **inveterate**, and *senex*, leading to **senile, senate,** and **senescent.**

Veteran is a person who has long experience of a particular thing, literally has become *old* in that field. Old here implies *perfection* and hence this word has a positive **connotation:**[64] *a veteran player, a veteran soldier,* or *a veteran politician.* **Inveterate** is a person who has become *old* in his habit since the habit is long established, ingrained and deep-rooted: *an inveterate gambler* or *an inveterate liar*. Note that this word, through long usage, has developed a negative connotation.

A **senile** person is an *old* person, whose senses have dulled and hence he is not as agile mentally as he was in his youth. **Senate** is a governing body of certain universities. It is also the upper house of parliament in some countries like USA, Australia, France, etc. The senate is so called because it is constituted of *older* people, who are expected to be more experienced, stable and mature thinking. **Senescent** is somebody or something that is growing *old* or decaying with the lapse of time: *his senescent brain cells adversely impacted his faculties.*

[64] **Connote** means to signify or suggest (certain meanings, ideas, etc.) in addition to the explicit or primary meaning: *the word 'fireplace' often connotes warm hospitality.*

From old age, let us take the natural progression to Greek *thanatos*—'death'. **Euthanasia**, with the prefix eu—'good', etymologically means good death. This term is very popular and at the same time controversial, in context of an ongoing debate on granting the right of self-determination of death to terminally ill patients, sometimes in excessive pain as well, with no hopes of recovery and mounting medical bills. Their suffering could be put to an end with a little cooperation in the final act by the doctor.

Did you know that The Netherlands boasts of one of the world's most liberal policies on euthanasia? Nowhere else has a physician reported helping a depressed but otherwise healthy patient commit suicide—the patient Hilly Bosseler and the psychiatrist Dr Boudewijn Chabot of Ruinen. A court ruling in The Netherlands recognized the right of a patient experiencing severe psychic pain to choose to die with dignity and concluded that intolerable psychological suffering is no different from intolerable physical suffering. Incidentally, Switzerland is also pretty advanced on euthanasia with several touristic resorts advertising this facility.

When someone dies, his body can be called variously as cadaver, corpse or carcass and it is prepared for the funeral or burial. Burial has the synonym **interment** and for Hindus, interment is **interdicted** (prohibited). Wow! 'Interment is interdicted' seems like a pretty good mnemonic to commit these two words to memory. We all know that before someone is buried, a grave is dug. It is this grave that landed Pepsi in trouble. 'Come alive with Pepsi' was a successful advertising slogan in USA but translated into German, its effect wasn't quite the same; one translation was, well, 'Rise from the grave with Pepsi'!

Once a dead person is buried, a tombstone is usually affixed with some inscriptions. These inscriptions could have been pre-decided by the person when he was alive or could depict the feelings of his kin. The word **epitaph** defines these inscriptions, which are fairly conventional, such as the following.

Joseph D'Souza
Born—1 April 1901
Died—1 April 1991
May his soul rest in peace

There are some really amusing and original epitaphs like the ones below, which can be found inscribed on many a tombstone in cemeteries strewn all over the globe.

Halt stranger!
Do not pass by
As you are so once was I
If I am so you'll be
Prepare then to follow me

To the best of our
knowledge lies 44/34/48
Hatched—1910
Matched—1930 and
Dispatched—1973

A very clever and ingenious remark from the spouse of a deceased wife was inscribed on the tombstone—*Rest in peace, until we meet again.*

While all these epitaphs are witty, one written as a poem is called an epigram. **Epigram** is a short, witty poem or saying, expressing a single thought in a clever and amusing way.

Epigram comes from Greek *epi*—'on' and *graphein*—'to write'. A few more examples of epigrams are:

Here lies my wife—here let her lie!
Now she's at rest—and so am I.
John Dryden

Woman	Husband
Grieve not for me, my husband dear, I am not dead, but sleepest here; With patience wait, prepare to die, And, in a short time, you'll come to I	I am not grieved my dearest wife, Sleep on, I have another wife; Therefore, I can't come to thee, For I must go and live with she[65]

Obituary is a notice of the death of a person, often with a biological sketch, as in a newspaper. Mark Twain sent a telegram to Associated Press on finding his obituary in the papers! He said—'The report of my death was an exaggeration.' On 27 August 2008, Bloomberg accidentally published a seventeen-page obituary of Steve Jobs. In a subsequent public appearance, Jobs joked about the accident by displaying on screen, an imprecise quotation of Mark Twain ('the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated'). Jobs died on 5 October 2011.

[65] Samuel Klinger, *Graveyard Laughter* (Futura Publications, London, 1980).

How about a little trivia to conclude this chapter? Did you know that Elvis Presley's name was misspelled on his tombstone as Elvis Aaron Presley, when he used to spell it Elvis Aron Presley? And also that noted poet Ben Jonson was buried vertically in Westminster Abbey. Why? No complicated reason, but simply due to paucity of space!

12

CONJUGAL SUBJUGATION

Having worked for a year in the banking area and having witnessed my female colleagues (married or otherwise) **slogging**[1] it out from early morning till late evening, my resolve to have a medico wife had been further strengthened.

Not only would this restore the family balance of one doctor and one engineer once my doctor sister married and moved away to a different town, I also reckoned that a doctor would be able to adjust to the demands of the family more easily. I was destined to work long hours, after I had sacrificed the 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. job as a mechanical engineer for what seemed from outside a **cushy**[2] life on a cushioned chair in an

[1] **Slog** means to hit hard, to deal heavy blows, as in boxing or cricket. It also means to walk or plod heavily as well as to toil. As a noun, a slog is a heavy blow, a long, tiring walk or march, and also very long, laborious work.

[2] **Cushy** means involving little effort for ample rewards; easy and profitable: *a cushy job*. It also means soft and comfortable; cushiony: *a cushy chair*. This word has probably originated from cush(ion) + y. It is also alleged, but less likely, to come from Hindi *khūsh*—'pleasant' or French *couchée*—'reclining'.

air-conditioned office. Hence, the spouse's job had to have the flexibility of cutting down on working hours as the time came for family expansion.

But most women doctors get booked by or hooked to medico boys even before they graduate from medical school. My schoolmates, who had gone to the local medical college, had also veered towards batchmates who showed promise of cracking the postgraduate medical entrance or seniors who had already accomplished this feat. Frankly, I had not appreciated the full import of this strong preference until I checked it out with a few school friends who were now happily and prosperously running clinics with their medico spouses. The mobility of an MBA job, which we perceived as one of its strongest pillars, was perceived as its biggest weakness by this community.

Naturally, most of them wanted to establish a private practice and, instead of supporting them at their clinics, we would keep uprooting them to move along to the four corners of our country and, when the time came, to at least four different countries, if not continents.

It was concluded that a matrimonial advertisement in the **classified**[3] columns of the top newspapers of the country

[3] **Classified** means (1) arranged or distributed in classes or according to class: *we plan to review all the classified specimens in the laboratory*; (2) of or designating the part or parts of a publication that contain advertisements or lists arranged by category: *he found a job for a 'typist' in the classified section of the newspaper*; (3) available only to authorized persons, confidential or secret: *the file with classified information was password protected*; and (4) identified as belonging to a specific group or category, as one to which benefits or restrictions apply: *the bank has a list of classified customers to whom it will not make large loans.*

was the only option, and it was quickly put into action. The responses from medicos were few and from those pursuing specializations, even fewer. Wherever talks progressed, they were **hampered**[4] by the knowledge that I was an internationally mobile officer. It seemed to be the end of the road but then another bright idea hit me and lifted my sagging spirits.

Every parent of a deserving ward released a matrimonial advertisement and hoped for a **deluge**[5] of befitting responses. The time had come for my family to take such an approach and scan these classifieds to pinpoint the most eligible medico match.

I was also inclined to put in my bit. I couldn't risk losing a miss by a scanning miss-out. I prepared my factual matrimonial biodata resisting the strong temptation to embellish it with exaggerated claims of accomplishments. My dad signed in original on about fifty copies and sent them through courier to my chummery address in Mumbai. Now every Sunday morning, I would get up early, eagerly await the arrival of the newspaper, grab it even before it could land on the balcony, and start circling the eligible candidates to whom I could post the personalized expression of interest. The top section of the biodata had been kept blank for this purpose.

Soon enough I was meeting eligible candidates (sometimes with their parents, sometimes with their female friends, and

[4] **Hamper** means to hold back; hinder; impede: *a steady rain hampered the progress of the work*. It also means to interfere with; curtail: *the dancers' movements were hampered by their elaborate costumes*. Hamper is also a large basket, usually with a cover.

[5] **Deluge** means a drenching rain, downpour, a great flood of water, inundation, etc. It also means anything that overwhelms like a flood: *she was deluged with congratulatory letters*.

sometimes alone) at expensive restaurants around my office or home. Some girls and their parents even wanted to check out my famed Pali Hill chummery. Somehow the details of this secret mission leaked in the office, and it became the flavour of many lunch and snack-time conversations.

My chummery mate Raj was soon **enamoured**[6] by this experience, its potential for achieving success, and quickly replicated it from himself. He went even further by signing his biodata posing as his father, as suddenly there was no time to waste in couriering the fifty copies to his home at Chandigarh and waiting for the return snail mail to climb up the slope of Pali Hill.

Our joint endeavour continued for six months without any perfect outcome. There were many candidates where minor points for disengagement (from either side) prevented the matter from proceeding to the next step of a formal engagement.

I now found myself vacillating between my reflective mood and my fond fantasies of the romantic outcomes if I or some of them had not pushed ourselves towards perfection. At this delicate time, one of my dear uncles happened to meet my future father-in-law. Over a cup of tea, my uncle discovered that my future father-in-law had an immensely talented, accomplished and beautiful doctor girl who was insistent on marrying a non-medico. My future father-in-law discovered my uncle's immensely capable, well-qualified and well-settled young nephew who was adamant on marrying a medico.

I flew into New Delhi (wiping out three months of savings in the process) and met Deepali at a fine dining restaurant.

[6] **Enamoured** is to be charmed in love, to be fond of or delighted by something or someone: *John is not enamoured by the idea of settling down in Canada; he plans to come back home within five years.*

Given that I had gathered good experience in this process, my questionnaire was sufficiently refined, expanded and memorized. However, the moment I caught sight of her from a distance, my memory vaporized. If I recollect correctly, even she barely asked me a couple of questions. I distinctly recollect that she enquired if I could use my famed job mobility to get an **expeditious**[7] transfer to New Delhi. I also vividly remember nodding my head in positive. The very next day we were engaged, and after a hurried courtship period, we took vows of marital *fidelity* till death do us part.

Given that the engagement happened so quickly, I did not get the time to inform my office regarding my location preference for the next role. When I came back from my engagement ceremony, due to sudden business exigencies, I—a nationally and internationally mobile officer—stood transferred on a two-year assignment to New Delhi.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves here and go back to the day our vows were solemnized. Raj was my best man at the wedding. He had found his soulmate Monica a little after I discovered Deepali but was faster at getting tied into holy matrimony. He was raring to give me a number of useful tips but I preferred to discover and learn on my own. He took care of my grooming and then plunged into enthusiastic dancing all through the long procession to the wedding hall. All this while, I was perched on a mare (female horse) feeling like a knight in shining armour who was about to rescue a damsel in distress.

Incidentally, there is an interesting legend on the evolving role of the **best man**. He is the one who helps in dressing

[7] **Expeditious** means prompt or quick: *the company prided itself on expeditious handling of queries from its customers.*

the groom and in other things at the marriage. According to Scottish legend, however, his duties used to be much more demanding. For it was customary for a man in love simply to kidnap and unceremoniously carry off the woman he had fallen for. He would choose good friends to help him in the task, and the bravest came to be known as the best man.

When we took vows of *marital fidelity*, we pledged to adhere to the contract of marriage and to remain faithful to each other. **Fidelity**[8] is an interesting word. It comes from Latin *fides*—'faith or trust' and means faithful performance of one's duty. People who breach this contract, become unfaithful and disloyal to a sexual partner (especially a spouse) by indulging in extramarital affairs, are branded **infidels**.[9] Let me share a very interesting case of breach of contract that came before the courts in The Netherlands some years ago. It was reported by a young man against his somewhat older next-door neighbour.

The young man and his wife wanted a child and had been trying for four years without success. At last, in desperation, they came to an agreement with their neighbour, a father of six, to help the wife conceive. However, after ten months and no positive result, all parties became very concerned. The neighbour took himself off for a medical check-up only to be told that he was sterile! At this point, his wife was forced to confess that their large family had all been fathered by another

[8] Another example of **fidelity** is found in the field of electronics, for instance, in hi-fi (high fidelity) music systems. Fidelity, here, refers to the degree of accuracy shown in reproduction of the actual signal in an audio or a video system.

[9] **Infidelity** also means any breach of trust or a disloyal act and lack of religious faith, especially Christian faith.

man. To crown it all, he was sued for breach of contract by his young neighbour! And so, for all time to come, he had to **kiss goodbye** to his mental peace.

From kiss, I recollect that in medical parlance, kiss is defined as 'juxtaposition of orbicular muscles'. The **kiss of life** is the mouth-to-mouth artificial respiration where air is blown into the victim's lungs in an attempt to **resuscitate**[10] the person. Besides the romantic and life-saving connotations, there is one more side to the kiss that you should not miss. The phrase **kiss something goodbye** as used above, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: accept the failure or loss of something as certain. For instance: *you can kiss goodbye to a holiday this year, we have no money*. Taking you out of this anti-climax, let us share a secret. Even now Eskimos and Polynesians prefer to rub noses and not kiss their spouses. According to one theory, Greek husbands initiated the practice of kissing their wives to find out if they had been drinking wine.

What a smart way to maintain *conjugal* bliss! I wonder if you are familiar with the word conjugal. **Conjugal** is something pertaining to the relation of husband and wife or characteristic of marriage: *conjugal vows*. The word has an interesting origin. It comes from 'con', a variant of *com*—'together' and Latin *jugum*—'yoke'. Hence, the inference that in marriage, two people get *yoked* together like oxen. The root *jugum* forms another interesting word *subjugate* when it combines with *sub*—'under'. **Subjugate** means to bring under complete control, to conquer or to master. It also means to make someone submissive or subservient, to enslave. Literally,

[10] **Resuscitate** means to revive, especially from apparent death or unconsciousness: *he was resuscitated by the paramedic who arrived in the nick of time*.

the word means to put *under* the same *yoke* that is used on oxen. The word originated from the practice of Roman conquerors to make prisoners crawl under a 'yoke'. This yoke was not the typical yoke used on oxen for tilling land; it was *improvised* from three crossed spears. This ceremony was conducted as a 'symbolism' of the subjugation of the prisoners and to induct them as slaves.

Here, I am tempted to explain the word *improvise* that is often confused with the word *improve*. **Improvise** means to compose, recite, perform (say a song, verse, or a play), or execute on the spur of the moment without any previous preparation; to extemporize: *when the lead actor forgot his lines, the other actors had to quickly improvise, so that the audience wouldn't feel that something was amiss*. It also means to create or arrange from whatever materials are readily available: *we improvised a dinner from the leftovers of lunch*.

Let us digress a bit and see how a company radically improved (not improvised) its sales performance by creatively rebranding its products. The manufacturers of a certain brand of male *contraceptive* couldn't understand why the *small* and *medium* sizes of their product were consistently outsold by the *large* size. After all, they had gone into a great deal of careful research and knew there was a market. In an attempt to crack the problem, they called in a team of marketers to find out what was going wrong. After a great deal of time and money was spent pondering over the problem, the product was relaunched (with great success)—still in the same three sizes but this time labelled *Large*, *Super* and *Giant*! ☺

Guess what the **aborigines**[11] of Australia used as a *contraceptive* to contain their population or space out their

[11] **Aborigines** are the natives or the first inhabitants of a place (as the Red Indians were in America).

children better. Are you wondering if contraceptives had been invented by then? And were they affordable? In fact, the aborigines didn't use any contraceptive at all. Their population was contained because they followed the practice of infanticide. Between 15 per cent to 50 per cent of infants were generally done to death. And the strangest thing is that it was the mother who usually did that an hour or so after the birth. The word **infanticide**[12] comes from Latin *cidium*—'act of killing' and hence it means the killing of an infant.

While I had dismissed this aboriginal custom of infanticide as an oddity, I was surprised to come across more unique customs and practices followed by them. One was **levirate:** the custom of compulsory marriage of the widow to her deceased husband's brother. **Polygamy** (a man taking several wives at a time) was yet another aboriginal custom.

You could argue that there is nothing original about it. Several communities in the world have, at some time or the other, practised polygamy. Let us see how it all started. It is said that during wars, many women found themselves husband-less and their children fatherless, as men were often killed at war. Under such extreme circumstances, war widows

[12] When someone kills oneself, it is **suicide** (Latin *sui*—'oneself'), when someone kills his/her own father, **patricide** (Latin *pater, patris*—'father'), his/her own mother, **matricide** (Latin *mater, matris*—'mother'), his/her own brother, **fratricide** (Latin *frater*—'brother'), his/her own sister, **sororicide** (Latin *soror*—'sister') and his own wife, **uxoricide** (Latin *uxor*—'wife'). When he/she kills just any person, **homicide** (Latin *homo*—'man') and when an entire race or tribe is obliterated, **genocide** (Greek *genos*—race'). Incidentally, **obliterate** is to remove or destroy all traces of, to do away with or destroy completely. It also means to erase or blot out (writing, marks, etc.): *the world record for 200 m set by Florence Griffith-Joyner in the 1988 Summer Olympics has still not been obliterated.*

were allowed to marry already married men so that it gave them a certain degree of dignity and a father to their children, and did not make them dependent on long-term welfare. The onus was on these men to **enjoin**[13] the good, feed the poor and needy and help support widows and orphans. In that light, I can understand why the practice started as an attempt to build a sustainable community.

Now, I am not sure if a wife would be happy if her husband got another wife or even if any husband is keen to have more than one wife. It is said that the ultimate punishment for polygamy is multiple mothers-in-law! However, it is an established fact that an aboriginal wife would in fact push her husband to get a second wife. The reason was simple—it was a question of survival. Since there was no agriculture at that time, the wife used to help the husband in gathering food from the jungles. More wives meant more food gatherers and hence more food coming into the family. Also, these wives could take turns looking after the children.

No discussion on matrimony is complete without a mention of marital discord and the rapidly toppling **ramparts**[14] of a traditionally dominant male, especially when tied in holy matrimony. In the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Toula complains to her mother about her father and how autocratic

[13] **Enjoin** means to command or impose with authority and emphasis: *the manufacturer of hard liquor was enjoined from using surrogate advertising*. This can be to get something done or to forbid something from being done. Doesn't this make *enjoin* a contronym?

[14] **Rampart** is an embankment of earth, usually with a parapet on top, encircling a castle, fort, etc., for defence against attack. Embankment is a bank of earth, rubble, etc. used to keep back water, hold up a road, or as part of a fortification: *outside the boundary walls of the hill fort, there was a deep ditch forming a rampart over five metres high*.

his behaviour is. 'Ma', she says, 'Dad is so stubborn! What he says goes. Ah, he says, the man is the head of the house!' Her mother looks at her, nods wisely, and says: 'Let me tell you something, Toula. The man is the *head*—but the woman is the *neck*. And she can turn the head any way she wants.'[15] ☺

This scene reminds me of a strong man and an equally strong woman, defined by the words *virile* and *virago* (from Latin *vir*—'a man, a hero'). **Virile** means pertaining to or characteristic of a man, having masculine (especially sexual) vigour and strength: *our country needs young and virile leadership*. **Virago** was originally a woman of masculine strength or spirit. In olden times of male dominance, men were known to possess a fiery temper and an abusive nature.

[15] John Assaraf & Murray Smith, *The Answer* (Simon & Schuster, London, 1998), p. 63

A modern-day virago, apart from the physical strength of a man, imbibes these behavioural characteristics as well.

One **henpecked**[16] husband was beaten mercilessly by his wife (one such modern-day virago) and hid under the bed. 'You come out this minute', the wife commanded. 'A man is a man,' he answered, 'when he says he won't come out, no matter what you do about it, he won't come out!' ☺

While *virago* may have a negative connotation, there are indeed powerful women in certain societies where they dominate men, as a rule rather than an exception. This power-wielding woman is called a **matriarch** (Latin *mater, matris*—'mother' and Greek *archein*—'to rule'). This word is especially used in the context of a mother having authority over her immediate family and the group of close relatives. Matriarch is also a woman who is the founder or dominant member of a community, group, clan or tribe. This word is also used to refer to a venerable old woman. Similarly there is a **patriarch** (Latin *pater, patris*—'father') where this authority rests with a man.

The above roots for mother and father easily lend themselves to form other words. For instance, **maternal** is of or relating to a 'mother' and so relatives on the mother's side like maternal aunt, maternal grandmother, etc. are maternal relatives. **Paternal** is of or relating to a 'father', like paternal uncle, paternal property, paternal collection of pottery, etc. Apart from this, we have a unique word called **patronymic**, a name derived from that of the father's or paternal ancestors especially by addition of a prefix or a suffix. Like Peter's son becomes Peterson, John's son is Johnson, and so on.

[16] **Henpecked** means dominated, bullied or intimidated by one's wife, usually as a result of her persistent nagging.

Let us conclude our discussion on matrimony with a tale of marital discord. We take help from a couple whose marital bliss in the initial years and grief later on is well documented in history—Leo Tolstoy and his wife Sofya Andreyevna Bers (or Behrs). He was thirty-four years old when he married Sofya, sixteen years younger to him. The first decade of their marriage brought Tolstoy the greatest happiness. Never before or after was his creative life so rich or his personal life so full. He wrote his immortal classic *War and Peace* in this period and also commenced writing his second classic *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy and Sofya had everything they could ask for: fame, money and children. And, in a way, theirs was an almost perfect relationship.

Then something astonishing happened. Tolstoy began to change. He became ashamed of the great books he had written. He gave away his lands and started leading a life of poverty. He worked in the fields, chopping wood, and **pitching**[17] **hay**.[18] He made his own shoes, swept his own room and ate out of a wooden bowl.

For his wife, this was a complete metamorphosis from the life she was used to and enjoyed. Unable to reconcile to this change, she started scolding and nagging her husband, screaming and shouting at him for not bringing the money his books could fetch. When he opposed her, she threw herself into fits of hysteria, rolling on the floor with a bottle of opium at her lips, swearing that she was going to kill herself and even threatened to jump in the well.

[17] **Pitching** means to throw, fling, hurl, or toss. It also means to erect or set up (a tent, camp, or the like), to put, set, or plant in a fixed or definite place or position: *we managed to pitch our tent despite heavy wind.*

[18] **Hay** is grass or other plants, cut and dried for **forage** (food for cattle or horse, fodder).

Finally, when Tolstoy couldn't take it any longer, he fled from his home on a snowy October night in 1910, not knowing where he was going. Eleven days later, he died of pneumonia on a railway platform. He was eighty-two years old. And his dying request was that Sofya should not be permitted near his body. Incidentally, towards the end of her days, Sofya admitted to her daughters that she was responsible for their father's death.

Sofya's nagging nature is explained by the word **xanthippe**: a scolding or ill-tempered wife, a shrewish woman. Etymologically, xanthippe means 'yellow horse', from Greek *xanthos*—'yellow' and *hippos*—'horse'. Are you trying to jog your memory and recollect if you have ever seen a yellow horse? Assuming they do exist in some obscure corner of this earth, isn't it worth wondering what conceivable connection can be established between a *yellow horse* and the meaning of the word *xanthippe*? Surprisingly, the connecting link is the wife of Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher. She was called Xanthippe.

Since the matter relates to late fifth century BCE, there are far more stories about Xanthippe than there are facts. She is believed to have been much younger than the philosopher, perhaps by as much as forty years. She was famed for her sharp tongue and is said to have been the only person ever to have defeated Socrates in an argument. After one particular quarrel, she was supposed to have emptied a chamber pot on Socrates' head, causing him to remark: '*After thunder, there generally falls rain.*' Socrates' saying '*Marry or marry not, in any case you'll regret it*' was supposedly in contemplation of his wife.

Having lived all his philosophical life amidst the nagging and tantrums of his wife, I was sure no one could be a bigger *misogamist* than he. I was in for a big surprise that, inspired by his marital difficulties, he conceived this sage advice—'*By*

all means marry. If you get a good wife, you will become very happy. And if you get a bad one, you will become a philosopher and that is good for every man.'

Misogamist comes from Greek *misein*—'to hate' and *gamos*—'marriage' and dictated by its etymology, this person has extreme dislike for the institution of marriage. Other words from the root *misein* are *misogynist* and *misanthrope*. Life for a **misogynist** (from Greek *gyne*—'woman') is a tragedy if spent in the company of women. He is convinced that the idea of creating women on earth was god's biggest blunder, and all the problems and evils of this world are a result of them. **Misanthrope** is a hater of mankind (Greek *anthropos*—'mankind').

While I have extended my own brief, I am getting tempted to learn some more lessons in English from these real-life stories where women could not be appeased or pacified. The words are *implacable*, *placate*, *placid* and *complacent*. All of them come from the Latin root *placare*, which means to calm, soothe, appease or pacify.

Implacable is someone you cannot appease, pacify, or cool down: *an implacable workers' union*. When someone tries to **placate** a person, he or she tries to pacify or calm that person who is upset and maybe even resentful. This is achieved especially through speech or actions that are pleasing, conciliatory, and offer solace, advice, or even some concessions: *the owner tried to placate the workers' union by agreeing to recall 50 per cent of the sacked workforce.*

Placid is used for someone who doesn't get angry, restless, or upset very easily, and stays cool, calm, and collected. Such a person is also easygoing, docile, good-natured, and mild-mannered. Placid can also be used to describe inanimate objects that are unruffled, tranquil, serenely quiet, or undisturbed:

placid waters of a lake. Similarly when someone is **complacent** that person is self-satisfied and pleased, especially with oneself or the environment, situation, etc., often without awareness of some potential danger or defect: *complacence set in due to an incorrect conclusion that jobs are now secure since the company has been bailed out by the government.*

You could learn these four words more easily if you form the following rhyme:

A *placid* fellow with a *complacent* look
Tried hard to *placate* the *implacable* cook

If you ask me who, why and which cook, I have no explanations. Use your fertile imagination, assume any situation, visualize any cook, and push your hippocampus just enough to remember this rhyme.[19]

[19] Incidentally, the root *placare* when combined with an additional root *sub*—'under', forms a seemingly unconnected word *supple*. **Supple** means mentally flexible, responding readily, and disposed to agree, sometimes to the point of servility. In the physical sense, it means bending easily without damage, lithe, flexible, elastic, etc.: *supple movement of a gymnast*. This physicality of supple comes from the extension of the meaning of *placare* (to calm, soothe, pacify) into its physical equivalent (bending, kneeling).

13

FAMILY EXPANSION

During our school days, summer vacation was always spent in the hills of Himachal Pradesh, where my maternal grandparents were based and five of my six uncles had also settled down after their marriages. In the holidays after Class 6 or 7, I went visiting my one and only convent educated aunt. During the course of one conversation, she asked me if my cousin back in Rohtak was 'in the family way'. She had heard rumours about this development but wanted to confirm the facts from the people nearest to her.

I thought my aunt was drunk. Didn't she herself come for the wedding of this **gregarious**[1] and garrulous cousin of mine (her niece) towards the end of last year? And now, she was asking me if she were in the 'family way'. Of course, if she is married, she is part of a new 'family' and not just on her 'way' to join a new family.

[1] **Gregarious** is someone who is fond of the company of others; outgoing, sociable, expressive, convivial, extroverted: *the birds are easiest to see during October to March when the young ones are particularly gregarious.*

Out of deference for the age difference between us, I did not air my suspicion about her state of strong **inebriation**[2] and kept giving her a look of bewilderment and mild shock. My aunt knew about the state of affairs at the English-medium school I studied in back home, quickly realized her folly, and followed this up with: 'Is there good news?' The fact that she was happily married was the best news, so why would my aunt only look for good news, I wondered.

When my bemused look intensified, she asked me: 'Is she preggers?' Now, I was sure that she was totally and completely drunk and had lost her entire memory and sense of sentence construction. Finally, when she asked me if my cousin were pregnant and expecting a baby, I concluded that she was sober again. Of course, I did not need to ask her or check the dictionary to conclude what she meant by 'family way' or 'good news' or 'preggers'!

Even before we were married, Deepali and I had decided not to spend the prime of our life changing nappies, boiling feeding bottles and arguing over whose turn it was to sleep with the baby. After twenty-five years of hectic student life and another two of even more hectic work life, we needed uninterrupted sleep for at least 1461 nights (four years) to repair the damage that hostel food, night-outs and defective studying postures had caused to our constitutions.

However, within two years of happy marriage, murmurs of 'Is Deepali in the family way?', 'Is there good news?' were heard from parents and countless aunts and uncles on both sides. We also saw some of our friends' wives with slightly **distended** (expanded, swollen) abdomens but hesitated to offer our congratulations and best wishes.

[2] **Inebriation** means to make drunk; intoxicate. It also means to exhilarate, confuse, or stupefy mentally or emotionally.

I was aware that a slight abdominal distension could be due to fondness for food without corresponding fondness to **expend**[3] energies through physical activity. Being a medico, Deepali was aware of several others reasons: medicine-induced overeating (side-effects of drugs like steroids that increase appetite) or medical conditions like hypothyroidism (which slows down the **basal**[4] **metabolism**[5] of the body) and hyperphagia (covered in 'Tummy Tuck').

It turned out that some of these friends' wives were actually in the family way. However, most of them had merely regained the weight that they had managed to shed thanks to six months of **rigorous**[6] dieting and **vigorous**[7] exercising

[3] **Expend** means to use up, to consume, etc.: *she expended most of her energy by running faster in the early laps and was easily overtaken by other runners towards the finishing line*. It also means to pay out, to spend: *the government expended most of the tax revenues on building infrastructure*.

[4] **Basal** means relating to, situated at, or forming the base; basic; fundamental, essential, etc.: *she clearly lacked even a basal familiarity with the topic*. In physiology, it means of, relating to, or being essential for maintaining the fundamental vital activities of an organism, as during total rest: *a basal diet is designed to meet essential nutritional requirements of the body*.

[5] **Metabolism** (biology, physiology) is the sum of chemical changes in living cells of an organism through which energy is provided for vital processes and activities. It also means any basic process of organic functioning or operating: *we must reform the country's judicial metabolism*.

[6] **Rigorous** means (1) characterized by rigour; rigidly severe or harsh, as people, rules, or discipline: *rigorous laws*; (2) severely exact or accurate; precise: *rigorous research*; and (3) (of weather or climate) uncomfortably severe or harsh; extremely inclement.

[7] **Vigorous** means (1) full of or characterized by vigour; (2) strong; active; robust: *a vigorous youngster*; (3) energetic; forceful: *vigorous*

undertaken prior to their wedding. It was beyond my comprehension to decide whether this torture were tolerated due to a strong desire to look slim in wedding albums, or the shapeliness was an outcome of the periodic cycle of losses and gains, which merely happened to be at its trough when the weddings were solemnized.

I sought my spouse's wise counsel on this matter. She thought she would lay a few facts on the table. She started: 'Most of them do harbour a deep desire to get back into shape. But do you know why, out of *fifty* people who embark upon a rigorous programme of dieting and exercise, only *one* can manage permanent weight loss?' Before I could even think of an educated guess, she answered herself. 'They either do it half-heartedly and hence lose patience midway or, after having achieved the desired reduction, stop following the exercise regimen and revert to their original pattern of rich diet and poor exercise. Hence, the adipose cells that had been squeezed dry of excess fat (not reduced in number, mind you), rapidly refill.'

A few days later, as I was reading an article in *Reader's Digest* on 'Ten ways to achieve permanent weight loss', I concluded that the 2 per cent of the people who pursue it wholeheartedly and manage permanent reduction must be helped by some emotional encounters like Mary had. Although Mary (37 years and 92 kg) knew she was overweight, she recalls: '*I would look at myself in the mirror and think, "You don't look so bad, Mary." Then, one day, I was in a restaurant and admired a woman's new baby and she asked me if mine were due anytime soon. That was it. I*

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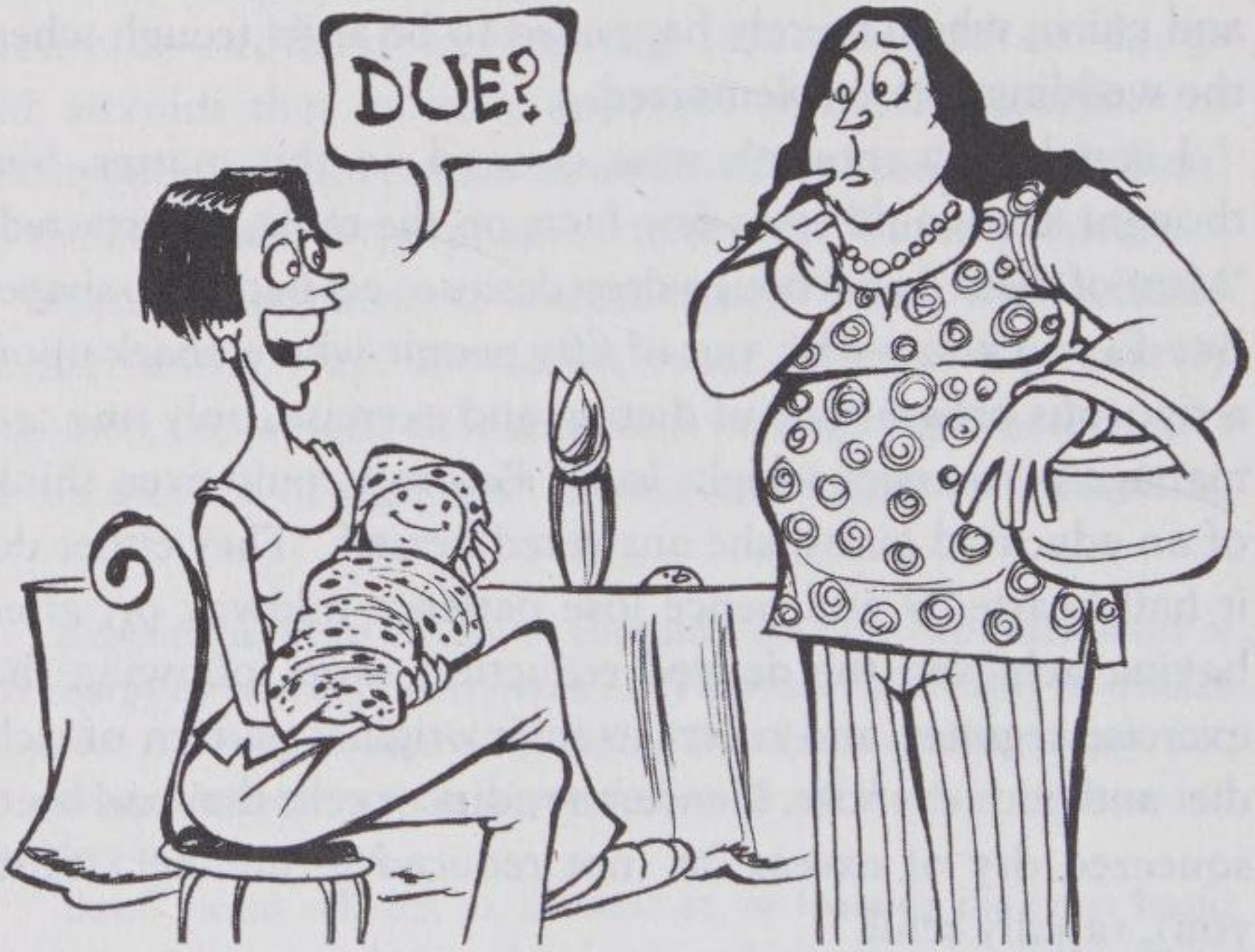
steps; a vigorous personality; (4) powerful in action or effect: *vigorous law enforcement*; and (5) growing well, as a plant.

just sat down and cried.' Forced to confront reality, Mary began to lose weight but not before she went through a really tough fitness regimen.



By now, I had concluded that it is damn easy to put on weight (by overeating or getting pregnant) and damn difficult to get rid of it. Deepali thought it was important to dispel my notion and put the record straight on my hasty conclusions. 'Please note,' she emphasized, 'abnormal weight gain after *copulation* is primarily a result of a popular misconception in our country that pregnant women should be extremely well-fed.'

Copulation was a brand new word for me and I was keen to appreciate its meaning before she proceeded to correct my second misconception. I checked that **copulation** comes from Latin *copula*—'to join' or 'fasten' and means to join in sexual intercourse. To note an interesting fact here—this word doesn't define the marital status of the partners. Both could

be unmarried or they may be husband and wife. But there are words that are limited in their usage to sexual behaviour of unmarried but willing mates (*fornication*) and sometimes extended to cases where one or both are married but not to each other (*adultery*).

I also read with interest that zoologists have observed that monkeys in zoos copulate far more than monkeys in the wild. Not because proximity increases their love for each other but, as one zoologist muses, 'It is the only thing left to do.'

After this short break, she proceeded to dispel my second myth that it is easy to get pregnant. I listened in rapt attention as she explained: 'After copulation, little do we know of the "travails" the sperm has to undergo to produce the desired effect. Nature has put many obstacles in the path of the ambitious sperm. The vaginal tract is highly acidic killing millions of spermatozoa even before they reach the uterus. Surviving that, they have to swim, often against gravity, a distance of over seven inches through **tortuous**[8] winding passages that are by no means smooth. Considering that the spermatozoa measures only 1/50th of an inch, this is roughly comparable to a man swimming four miles in thick molasses at the rate of a mile in 17.5 minutes.'

She continued: 'After such **travails,**[9] it is amazing that around 200 of these talented and determined spermatozoa, the little **harbingers**[10] of life, are able to reach the massive

[8] **Tortuous** is something full of twists and turns. A mountain road is usually tortuous, as is an argument that is not straightforward.

[9] **Travail** means pain, anguish, or suffering resulting from mental or physical hardship.

[10] **Harbinger** is anything that announces or indicates a future event, like the arrival of somebody or something: *returning swallows are harbingers of the spring season.*

and usually lone ovum. Here too, there is no end to their misery. Each one of them is tempted to fuse with the prized ovum, which entails breaking the hard shell that cocoons her. They attempt this by repeatedly and vigorously lashing their tails on the ovum. The most vigorous and determined or sometimes the lucky one, who breaks it, makes its way inside, **fuses**[11] with the ovum and the door to the 199 or so also-rans gets permanently closed.'

Months flew by. One of our family friends, Ramya, was now heavily pregnant and expected to break into labour any time. In the middle of the next week, when I was **inundated**[12] with calls from my clients (business was good) and working to clear the pile of emails that would accumulate as soon as I diverted my focus to these telephone calls, Venkatesh called me. He sounded quite tense that Ramya's obstetrician Dr Sonia had admitted her in the hospital and, after examination, concluded that she would have to perform a C-section on her that very evening. I picked up Deepali from her clinic and we rushed to the hospital.

The hospital was some distance away from her workplace and I used the opportunity to ask Deepali why Venkatesh had not consulted a gynaecologist but a specialist by the name of Dr Sonia, who specialized in clearing obstructions. Deepali burst out laughing and gently tapped on my forehead while uttering the word *buddhu* (Hindi for 'stupid').

[11] **Fuse** is to combine, blend or mingle: *the twins who were fused at their torsos were successfully separated in a twelve-hour-long surgery.*

[12] **Inundate** means to flood, cover with water, deluge: *the town was inundated by floodwaters for weeks on end.* It also means to overwhelm: *as soon as the news of his illness spread, John and the family were literally inundated with offers of help.*

'Dr Sonia,' she explained, 'is both a gynaecologist as well as an obstetrician. And for your information, an obstetrician's job is not to clear obstructions, but to help in delivering babies into this world.'

She clarified that most people do not get to hear this term very often because it is somewhat difficult to pronounce this word. So people use the term 'gynae' more commonly. She also thought it would be nice to let me know that the profession of child delivery has gained respectability only in the last 100 years or so. In earlier times, it was regarded so **contemptible**[13] and filthy that when in 1521 Dr Rudolf Veithes became the first man to assist at birth, he was burnt at the **stake**[14] for his act!

I had another question for her. 'I have heard of children being delivered normally (without any surgery) or through surgical intervention. I know that this surgery is called a **Caesarian**[15] but what is a C-section and when is it performed?' Deepali gave another gentle tap on my forehead

[13] **Contemptible** means shameful, despicable, disreputable, etc: *his act was so contemptible that his family disowned him.*

[14] **Stake** is (1) a stick or post pointed at one end for driving into the ground as a boundary mark, part of a fence, support for a plant, etc., and (2) a post to which a person is bound for execution, usually by burning: *Joan of Arc was sentenced to be burnt at the stake.*

[15] **Caesarian** comes from shortening of Caesarian section; supposedly from Gaius Julius Caesar, who is said to have been delivered surgically, this legend traces his **cognomen** (surname or any name, especially a nickname) to Latin *cæsus* pp. of *cædere*—'to cut'. But if this is the etymology of the name, it was likely an ancestor who was so born. (Caesar's mother Aurelia survived his birth and lived to see his triumphs though such operations were always fatal to the woman in ancient times.) The procedure involves surgically cutting skin, abdominal wall, and uterus to allow abdominal delivery.

but resisted calling me stupid a second time. She explained that a Caesarean and a C-section are synonymous and this surgery is performed when normal delivery is not possible as it may put the baby's or mother's life or health at risk. It involves an incision on the lower abdomen to take the child out of the uterus.

She explained further: 'A Caesarean is a painless operation because the patient is under the spell of general or **epidural anaesthesia,**[16] but it involves a slightly longer hospital stay, is relatively more expensive, and also leaves a permanent incision mark on the abdomen. Naturally then, Caesareans are generally performed only when they become absolutely unavoidable.'

Later, while reading an article in *The Times of India* on the increasing incidence of Caesareans, especially in the developed world, I understood that approximately one in seven childbirths is statistically expected through a Caesarean. In developed countries, however, one hears that as many as one-third of all babies are born through Caesarean sections, not always because it is medically necessary or because doctors get an extra fee for the surgery but because it has become a status symbol—it shows that you have the money and will spend to avoid pain. Now, there is a new phrase to define these rich moms—'too posh to push'.

I would see other animal species having a far easier time at childbirth and that too, without any assistance from midwives or doctors, and wonder why humans suffer much

[16] **Epidural anaesthesia** is an injection of anaesthetic into the space outside the *dura mater* enveloping the spinal cord. **Dura mater** is the tough, fibrous membrane forming the outermost of the three coverings of the brain and spinal cord.

more pain and need assistance at childbirth. I used to think that this could be attributed to the progressive improvement in human intelligence, leading to growth in the size of the skull disproportionate to the growth (if at all) in the size of the pelvic cavity. This may be true but is not, by any means, the only factor responsible for this phenomenon. I gleaned the actual reason from *A Short History of Nearly Everything* by Bill Bryson.

Since humans evolved from walking on all the four limbs to standing upright and walking on two legs (called bipedalism), the **pelvic**[17] region had to undergo some modification to support significantly greater load, which in females meant comparative narrowing of the birth canal. Moreover, for the baby's head to get through such a tight space, it must be born when its brain is still small. This meant long-term infant care, which in turn implied a strong commitment from both parents, leading to stronger bonding between them. I wonder if this also influenced monogamous behaviour in *Homo sapiens* . . .

In a few months, another friend Rahul's wife had to undergo a Caesarean. The accuracy of the statistics of normal delivery versus Caesarean (at 7:1) was now seriously suspect. I asked Rahul why a Caesarean was required. He explained that all along it was planned as a normal delivery, but towards the end of the **gestation**[18] period, the baby started rotating in

[17] **Pelvic** means of or pertaining to the pelvis, the basin-like cavity in the lower part of the trunk, after the abdomen (in the case of many vertebrates, including humans).

[18] **Gestation** refers to the period of development in the uterus from conception until birth. It also means the conception and development of a plan or an idea in the mind: *the longest gestation period across all animals is that of a common frilled shark (at 1279.25 or more days).*

the uterus on its own. 'The gynaecologist informed us that considering the baby is now in a breech position and also due to some other complications, she recommends a C-section,' said Rahul.

It was getting too technical and I thought it wise to ask Deepali to simplify the concept of breech position for me. There was also an exciting possibility of learning a new word in the process. Deepali explained with the help of a diagram: 'In a normal delivery, the head of the baby usually peeps out first. Though rare (approximately 3.5 per cent of the cases), at times, legs are the welcome guests. This is called the breech position.' She hastily added: 'This is not abnormal and if a baby in such a position is delivered normally, it is called a **breech delivery**.'

I began wondering if the nomenclature 'breech' is inspired by the 180-degree turn in position of delivery being construed as a 'breach' of protocol! 'This logic is indeed creative but not correct,' said Deepali, ending my endeavour at creating an excellent mnemonic (*breech* and *breach*).

'**Breech** is the lower rear portion of the human trunk; the buttocks. It is also the hind or lower part of anything,' she explained. I now recollected reading about an incident where a gun had backfired (an explosion toward the breech rather than the muzzle of a firearm) injuring a soldier.

'You will be amused to know that the name for this position of delivery is inspired by **breeches** (a singular word). Breeches is the name for a knee-length garment, often with ornamental buckles or elaborate decoration at or near the bottoms,' Deepali

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This distinction in the mammalian world belongs to African elephants with an average gestation period of 660 days and a maximum of 760 days.

clarified. As I read further, I discovered that this garment was commonly worn by men and boys in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. However, these days, this word is often used for trousers extending to the knee or just below, worn for riding, mountaineering, etc. and in informal usage, for any trousers.

We completed four years as earlier planned before we managed to repair the damage hostel food, night-outs, and defective study postures had caused to our constitution. We also took some time off each of these four years to reinvigorate our spirits and challenge our minds by indulging in some adventure sports.

At this stage, Deepali's maternal and my paternal instincts were getting stronger. Murmurs from parents and relatives had long matured to a string of direct and hard-hitting questioning. 'Are you happy together? Are you sure there is nothing wrong?' I was not sure if the 'nothing wrong'

was directed at misplaced sexual preferences or biological disorders or both.

Our first baby came along in the fifth year of our marriage. She arrived, through a normal delivery, a couple of weeks prior to the expected date of delivery. While she weighed a healthy 3 kg, I was concerned if she was premature and needed to stay in the incubator! Like any anxious and overly cautious first-time father, I presented my query to Dr Sunil Mohan, the **neonatologist**[19] who assisted in looking after her while the obstetrician Dr Uma Sarin looked after Deepali.

Dr Mohan was patient with me and assured me that she was not premature, only a few weeks preterm. 'Doctor, aren't these terms synonymous and hence used interchangeably?' Dr Mohan started laughing, and said, 'A lot of my patients routinely make this mistake. These terms have different meanings. Preterm is a baby that weighs at least 2.5 kg but arrives before completion of the normal gestation period of 37 weeks. However, a **premature**[20] baby weighs less than 2.5 kg at birth and must be kept in an incubator to complete the development and growth that would have normally taken place inside the uterus (commonly known as the womb).'

Within a couple of days, we brought our little angel home. We named her Tamanna. As she grew, my vocabulary grew. After every feed, she had to be **burped**[21] and when she howled,

[19] **Neonatologist** is super-specialized paediatrician who treats only neonates i.e. new born babies till they turn 28 days old.

[20] Premature infants are characterized by low birth weight, small size, irregular breathing, absence of subcutaneous fat, and thin skin.

[21] **Burp** is a belch. It also means to cause a baby to belch by patting its back, especially to relieve flatulence after feeding: *if she responds positively to her feeding, she will let out a little burp, yawn, and fall asleep.*

she had to be given a **pacifier.**[22] When she was two years old, we put her in the toddler's transition programme in Kangaroo Kids preschool in Pali Hill, Bandra. The school had a life-size replica of a kangaroo who had recently delivered a joey. In fact, my daughter taught me that a kangaroo's baby is called a joey. He was securely and comfortably **ensconced**[23] in his mother's pouch. This pouch was a big hit in the school and kids routinely investigated this cavity in the hope of fishing out a surprise gift. I am sure they connected it with the gift bag of Santa Claus.

Tamanna would often ask why her mommy did not have a similar pouch. Finally, when we concluded that she was indeed feeling jealous of the joey having got a more caring mother, we bought a similar one from the market. Now, she was happy that a pouch would mysteriously appear on either mommy's or daddy's tummy whenever she wanted to ride and yet retain the freedom to move her arms and legs. She was now a little sad for the little joey, as she could not locate his daddy in the school and, hence, couldn't ascertain whether the joey went on joy rides with his daddy.

Soon she was reciting her favourite rhymes with full expressions and actions:

One, two, three, four, five,
Once I caught a fish alive,

[22] **Pacifier** means a person or thing that pacifies (to restore peace to). It is also a rubber or plastic device, often shaped into a nipple, for a baby to suck or bite on.

[23] **Ensconce** means to settle securely or snugly: *I found her in the library, ensconced in an armchair.* It also means to cover or shelter; hide securely: *he ensconced himself in the closet to eavesdrop.*

Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,
Then I let it go again.
Why did you let it go?
Because it bit my finger so.
Which finger did it bite?
This little finger on my right.

We thought this was an excellent technique to teach numbers, give a child some sense of direction (right and left), and initiate the lessons—starting with the little finger—in names of all fingers of a hand.

I was getting interested in and admiring the potential of rhymes in building a child's general knowledge and vocabulary. The next one reinforced this newly discovered realization:

Oh, jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way.
Oh, what fun it is to ride
In a one horse open sleigh.

Whenever we would go to the temple with her, she would excitedly look up at the bells hanging from the ceiling and made sure that, before anyone else, she **chimed**[24] her jingle

[24] **Chime** is (1) an apparatus for striking a bell to produce a musical sound; (2) harmonious sound in general; music; melody; (3) to sound harmoniously, as a set of bells: *the church bells chimed at noon*; (4) to produce a musical sound by striking a bell, gong, etc.: *the doorbell chimed*; (5) to speak in cadence or singsong; to harmonize; agree: *the scenery chimed perfectly with the play's eerie mood*; (6) (often as plural, chimes) a set of bells or of slabs of metal, stone, wood, etc., producing musical tones when struck; a musical instrument consisting of such a set, especially a glockenspiel.

bells. Thanks to the beautiful illustration of the rhyme in her book, I was sure she already had some idea about *sleigh* even if she could not articulate it clearly at that time.

The very next one she learned personally bothered me greatly:

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pale of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown,
And Jill came tumbling after.

I realized that while this rhyme was indeed very durable and had endured many generational shifts, I did not recollect ever asking my teacher in the crèche (or even later) what was meant by a *pale* or a *crown*. As I grew up, **pale** meant (1) lacking intensity or brightness of colour, whitish: *a pale complexion; pale yellow*; and (2) faint or feeble; lacking vigour: *a pale protest*. And **crown** meant (1) any of various types of headgear worn by a monarch as a symbol of sovereignty, often made of precious metal and ornamented with valuable gems; and (2) the distinction that comes from a great achievement: *the award crowned her career*.

It seemed now that these words had extended meanings and so I checked, alphabetically. **Crown** also means (1) the top or highest part of bodily structure, especially the head: *Jack fell down and broke his crown*; (2) the part of a tooth that is covered by enamel and projects beyond the gum line; and (3) (of a baby in childbirth) to reach a stage in delivery where the largest diameter of the foetal head is emerging from the pelvic outlet.

Pale also means a stake or picket used as an upright member in a fence; an enclosing barrier, especially a fence

made of pales. I already knew the word **impale** (pierce with a pointed stake as torture or punishment) but only now did I start to dig out its etymology. Originally (1530), the word impale meant to enclose with stakes, fence in. The sense of 'pierce with a pointed stake' as torture or punishment was first recorded in early seventeenth century.

Despite my extensive research on the word *pale*, when I could not locate any meaning that even remotely resembled a bucket, I decided not to trust my memory and actually read the rhyme from her book. And then it was the turn of my face to turn pale. The word is **pail** (and not pale) and it means a bucket.

Here is one of her other favourites:

I'm a little teapot, short and stout,
Here is my handle, here is my spout,
When I get all steamed up, hear me shout,
Just tip me over and pour me out!

I did not recollect ever reciting this rhyme in my childhood but it got me to reconfirm the meanings of **stout**[25] and **spout**.[26]

[25] **Stout** means (1) bold, brave, firm, resolute; (2) strong in body; sturdy; (3) bulky in figure; thickset or corpulent; (4) powerful; forceful; and (5) stubborn or uncompromising: *the union leader put up stout resistance to the proposal.*

[26] **Spout** is (1) a pipe, tube, or liplike projection through or by which a liquid is discharged, poured, or released; (2) a trough or chute for discharging or pouring grain, flour, etc.; (3) to emit or discharge forcibly especially through a narrow gap or under pressure (a liquid, granulated substance, etc.) in a jet or continuous stream; and (4) (informal) to talk or speak at some length or in an oratorical manner: *he spouted his theories on foreign policy for the better part of the night.*

Given her fascination for kangaroos and fish, around the time she turned four, we took her to Australia, the land of kangaroos. Another little angel Prakriti, who was born into our family (once again, a natural delivery) earlier in the year, accompanied us on this trip. She was very comfortable in the same pouch we had bought for her elder sister, now a mature four-year-old.

Australia's zoos and animal conservation parks were full of **marsupials**[27] like kangaroos, wombats, and opossums. Tamanna had a great time marvelling at their unique style of locomotion, by jumping on their strong hind legs. She was also **intrigued**[28] by how, at the slightest hint of threat, even an older joey would stop **frolicking**,[29] dive into its mother's pouch, and hide itself completely.

I also used this opportunity to extend my vocabulary. I had heard of the idiom *to play possum* and wondered if the *possum* of the idiom and the *opossum* of Australia were somehow related. I was delighted to discover that *possum* is another name for *opossum*, a small- to medium-sized marsupial, the largest about the size of a large house cat and the smallest the size of a mouse.

[27] **Marsupials** are mammals characterized by a distinctive *pouch* (*marsupium*), which contains the mammary glands to feed the young and in which the females carry their young through early infancy. Some marsupials are kangaroos, wombats and bandicoots.

[28] **Intrigue** means (1) to arouse the curiosity or interest of by unusual, new, or otherwise fascinating or compelling qualities; appeal strongly to; captivate: *the plan intrigues me but I wonder if it will work*; and (2) to accomplish or force by crafty plotting or underhand machinations: *it is a tale of political and sexual intrigue.*

[29] **Frolic** means merrymaking, playful behaviour, merriment or fun. As a verb, it means to play about merrily, in a frisky, light-spirited manner: *the children were frolicking in the snow.*

One of their characteristic traits, I read, is that they pretend to be dead when attacked. Hence the idiom **to play possum,** which means to **feign**[30] sleep or death to escape being caught. It also means to pretend to be ignorant of something, with an intention to deceive: *the children played possum when the teacher asked who had drawn the* ***caricature***[31] *on the blackboard.*

On the way back from Australia, we stopped over at Singapore. The first excursion was naturally to the island of Sentosa. Tamanna was excited when she touched a starfish resting on the floor of an open pool. And as soon as we entered the giant aquarium, she shrieked with delight. Till then, she had only seen colourful but rather small fishes in the tanks displayed at some restaurants and resorts. The dimensions of this aquarium and the size and variety of aquatic species on display were overwhelming for anyone, and particularly for a four-year-old.

I read with interest that the **whale** is the largest mammal (or animal for that matter) to have ever inhabited the earth. The adult of a species called blue whale grows to be about 25 metres long on average, weighs about 109 tonnes, and eats approximately 4000 kg of **krill**[32] every day. Even its newborn calf is about 7.6 m long, weighs 5.4–7.3 tonnes, and drinks 23–90 litres of milk each day. The largest specimen of whale ever found was a 29 metre long female weighing over 158 tonnes.

[30] **Feign** means to put on an appearance or imitate someone: *to feign sickness* or *to feign another person's voice.*

[31] **Caricature** is a picture or a description that hugely exaggerates the peculiarities or defects of a person or a thing.

[32] **Krill** is the collection of small marine crustaceans of the order *Euphausiacea* that are the principal food of whales.

No wonder English has been deeply influenced by its dimensions and has adopted its name as a word in the lexicon to denote something big, great, or impressive: *I had a whale of a time at the ski camp in Austria*. You may be surprised to note that the adult blue whale has a tongue that is heavier than an African elephant and arteries so broad that a child could crawl through them! The sperm whale's heart is comparable in size to an elephant.

We also spent a lot of time at the Singapore zoo. Tamanna was most fascinated to see the giraffe and the elephant. She explained to us why giraffes have such long necks since she saw them plucking and chewing leaves from the branches of tree. However, she was confounded by the fact that elephants chose not to welcome her properly and continued to bathe in the pool. Her only solace was to see them saying 'hello' by flapping their huge external ears.

How could I explain to her that large animals like the elephant, the hippopotamus and the rhinoceros have a surface area so small, as a proportion to their volume, that they need to resort to artificial means to lose excess heat from the body! One usually finds them **wallowing**[33] in water or wet mud. How could I break her heart by telling her that by **incessantly**[34] flapping their huge external ears, they were not greeting her but trying to lose more body heat!

I wished the elephants were not grey in colour but white so that instead of absorbing so much heat from the sunrays, they would reflect most of it. This would keep them cool, and

[33] **Wallow** is to roll about or lie in water, snow, mud or dust etc.; to luxuriate, revel, or live self-indulgently: *to wallow in luxury*.

[34] **Incessant** is something that never ends: *incessant rainfall*.

they could always stand up to greet little children properly and even take them for a ride.

Soon after we were back from this trip, I found out that **albino**[35] elephants do exist, even though they are quite rare. I gathered this from the 2008 desk calendar of an Indian company Reliance Money. Apparently, in olden times, albino elephants were given away as gifts by the rulers of Thailand. These gifts were offered very selectively and, strangely, not to the ruler's favourites, but only to people who had fallen out of favour of the rulers.

If you are wondering why a king would gift away a rare species of elephant especially to a person he disliked, the answer is that these elephants were considered sacred in Thailand and hence weren't permitted to work! Soon enough, they would become a burden on the owners, as the expenses for the caretaking would eat up all their money and they would be driven to destitution. This is the origin of the term **white elephant**—an investment that nobody wants because it is unprofitable.[36]

Think of an elephant and the image of an imposing jumbo **conjures**[37] up. There is an interesting story behind how the word jumbo came to be associated with the elephant. It is

[35] **Albino** is an animal that lacks the skin-colouring pigment melanin and, as a result, has extremely white skin.

[36] A **white elephant** is the official mount/vehicle of Lord Indra, the king of gods as per Hindu mythology. This mythical pachyderm is called Airavat, has four tusks and seven trunks, and is spotless white. Given that a white elephant is the official vehicle of the king of gods, it is considered sacred and holy and not allowed to work.

[37] **Conjure** means to effect, produce or bring, as if by invocation, magic or spell: *to conjure a miracle*. It also means to bring to mind, to recall (usually followed by *up*): *to conjure up the past*.

put very aptly by Philip Howard in his book *Words Fail Me*: 'The change in meaning happened in 1865 when London Zoo acquired the first African elephant to depress the soil of England. The elephant arrived in Regent's Park in a **wretched**[38] condition, half-starved, filthy, and covered with sores and no jumbo in the modern sense. But it was called Jumbo, a suitable African name probably derived from the second element of **mumbo–jumbo**.'[39] It is also likely that this word is a variation of either of two Swahili words jambo (which means 'hello') or jumbe (which means 'chief').

Until Jumbo the elephant arrived in Regent's Park, the word jumbo had indicated shambling clumsiness. In fact, a dictionary of 1823 defined **jumbo** as a clumsy, unwieldy fellow. Jumbo recovered from this journey and grew bigger and stronger. At the height of his growth, Jumbo stood 11 feet 4 inches at the shoulder and weighed 6.5 tonnes. Hence he became the Jumbo of modern lingo.

Jumbo was sold by London Zoo in February 1882 for 10,000 dollars to an American businessman P.T. Barnum, owner of 'The Greatest Show on Earth', Barnum & Bailey Circus, much against the wishes of Londoners. In fact when Barnum offered to buy Jumbo, 1,00,000 schoolchildren wrote to Queen Victoria begging her not to sell him. Barnum, a circus showman, began exhibiting Jumbo all over America. Barnum's handbills depicted Jumbo as absolutely enormous,

[38] **Wretched** means very unfortunate in condition or circumstances, poor, sorry, miserable, pitiable, and worthless: *a wretched job of sewing*. It also means hateful, despicable, contemptible, or mean: *a wretched miser*.

[39] **Mumbo-jumbo** means unintelligible or incomprehensible language or a language of ritualistic activity that is intended to confuse.

one showed a coach and horses running through its legs, with plenty of clearance. Thanks to Barnum's tireless and inventive promotion, the name **Jumbo** became associated with largeness, and before long people were buying jumbo cigars, jumbo suitcases, jumbo portions of food, and eventually travelling on jumbo jets.

Sadly, Jumbo's American career was short-lived. One night in September 1885, he was hit by an express train, which arrived unexpectedly and **ploughed**[40] into him at St Thomas, Ontario, Canada. Never one to miss a chance, Barnum had Jumbo's skin and bones separately mounted, and thereafter, was able to exhibit the world's largest elephant to two audiences, without any of the costs of care or feeding. He made far more money out of Jumbo dead than alive.[41]

Thanks in part to the impressive growth and widespread popularity of Jumbo, even the word **elephant** came to be generically associated with things that come in extra large proportions or having enormous strength. This led to the word **elephantine,** which means pertaining to or resembling an elephant, so huge, ponderous, strong, and sometimes even clumsy. We have examples of usage like *elephantine efforts, elephantine memory,*[42] *etc.* The elephant also lends its name

[40] **Plough** means to make or form with driving force: *I ploughed my way through the crowd.* It also means to cut through, to break and turn over (earth) with a plough. A plough is a farm implement consisting of a heavy blade at the end of a beam, usually hitched to a draught team or motor vehicle and used to break up soil and cut furrows in preparation for sowing.

[41] Bill Bryson, *Made in America* (Black Swan, London, 1998), pp. 395–396

[42] The usage 'elephantine memory' may also originate from the excellent memory that these animals possess. The elephant brain is

to a disease called **elephantiasis**, a chronic **filarial**[43] disease (hence, also **filariasis**), characterized by marked enlargement of the parts affected, especially legs and scrotum. It is also sometimes used to denote an **untoward**[44] growth or development: *bureaucratic elephantiasis*.

As Prakriti started growing up, she developed a fondness for kittens and pups. Did we have a choice but to bring a kitten into the family? The kitten came along with her paraphernalia of feeding bottles, bowls, kitten feed, a mat, and a small pillow. She promptly named her Catty and got busy learning how to feed her, bathe her, chase her around the house and so on.

The name Catty got me thinking. I had heard of this word being used other than as a common or a proper noun. I figured that **catty** means subtly cruel or malicious; spiteful: *a catty remark*. It also means **stealthy**,[45] feline, etc. Feline,

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denser than the human's, and the temporal lobes, associated with memory, are more developed than in humans. Elephant lobes also have more folds, so that they can store more information.

[43] **Filarial** means related to or infested with parasite worms, especially filariae, usually transmitted by mosquitoes.

[44] **Untoward** means unfortunate: *untoward circumstances forced him into bankruptcy*. It also means improper: *if you see anything untoward, please let us know*.

[45] **Stealth** means secret, covert, clandestine, furtive, or surreptitious: *a stealth mission to hire key personnel from the largest competitor*. Stealth also means to move carefully to avoid detection. The word stealth gained prominence after the development of a new fighter aircraft by US Air Force, which was difficult to detect by radars, sight, sound or even infrared devices and was popularly called a stealth bomber or a stealth fighter. B-2 Spirit, F-117 Nighthawk, F-22 Raptor, and F-35 are some of the prominent stealth aircraft of recent times.

now what's that? I checked further and understood that **feline** simply refers to the members of the cat family. It also suggests the characteristics of a cat: **supple,**[46] subtle, and graceful on one hand and **sly,**[47] stealthy, or **treacherous**[48] on the other hand. The latter meanings are influenced by the methods employed by feline creatures to hunt.

Incidentally, have you heard that *cats have nine lives*? People will tell you about when their cat fell from the third floor and just got up and walked away, or when it survived a car hit, and so on. This makes one think that cats *return to life* after sustaining fatal accidents!

However, the ability of the cats to survive these accidents that would kill humans or other animals is not due to the gift of multiple lives but to several advantages they possess. Their small size and low body weight soften the impact as they make contact with the ground after falling from great heights. Their highly developed inner ears equip them with an unusually keen sense of balance, which is critical to their landing on their feet. This sense of balance allows a cat falling upside down to right itself by rapidly determining its position, repositioning itself, and making any adjustments necessary to ensure that it lands on all fours.

[46] **Supple** means flexible and elastic, something that bends easily without damage: *supple movements of a gymnast*. It also means *mentally* flexible, responding readily, and ready to agree, sometimes to the point of servility.

[47] **Sly** means cunning, mischievous, secretive: *a sly grin crept on to his face as he sensed an opportunity to take revenge*.

[48] **Treacherous** means unfaithful and untrustworthy, deceptive and unreliable. It also means unstable or insecure, as footing; dangerous; hazardous: *a treacherous climb*.

Since cats land on all four paws, the impact from landing on the ground is spread over and hence easily absorbed by the four paws. Additionally, cats bend their legs when they land, which cushions the impact by spreading it, not only through bones (that could easily break otherwise), but through the joints and muscles as well. Most are surprised to learn that a cat stands a greater chance of survival if it falls from a higher place than from a lower place! The simple answer for this strange anomaly is that a cat falling from a lower height does not have the opportunity to increase its body's area, slow its fall, or position its body to land on all four feet.[49]

In time, we also bought a pup for Prakriti. The salesman at the pet shop inquired if we also wanted to buy a leash and a muzzle. When he showed us a sample of each, I understood that a **leash** is a line or a chain to hold a dog or other animal, and a **muzzle** is a guard of straps or wires placed over the nose and mouth of an animal to prevent it from biting. I suddenly remembered a very apt and a rhyming word—nuzzle. **Nuzzle** is to press or rub gently with the nose: *the dog nuzzled my hand with affection.*

I was inspired by this experience to explore what other words I could add to my catty, oops, kitty. But before anything else, let me share some interesting trivia on dogs. Do you know that there was a Hollywood movie that was first shown to an audience comprising 100 dogs? It was titled *A Dog That Saved Hollywood*, and it starred a dog called Won Ton Ton. This movie was a spoof on the craze surrounding Rin Tin Tin, a dog adopted from a First World War battlefield

[49] http://www.coolquiz.com/trivia/explain/docs/cats2.asp, last accessed on 12 September 2012.

that went on to star in *twenty-three* Hollywood films. Rin Tin Tin was much sought after. He was signed to endorse deals and featured in many advertisements. When he died in 1932 in Los Angeles, it set off a national response in the USA. Regular programming was interrupted by a news bulletin, and an hour-long programme about Rin Tin Tin was played the next day.

I discovered that dogs have some interesting words and phrases to their credit. **Dog-eared**, in a book, refers to a corner of a page folded over like a dog's ear, as by careless use, or to mark a place. It also means shabby and worn out: *dog-eared furniture after long use*. The idiom **in the doghouse** is slang for 'in great disfavour or trouble': *he is really in the doghouse with our boss as he was again late for the fortnightly team meeting*. **Dogged** is stubbornly unyielding, persistent in effort: *he went about learning paragliding with amazing doggedness and kept going with his glider long after all others had called it a day*. This word draws from a similar trait found commonly in dogs.

Now that I have discovered that birds and animals are such rich sources of words for the English language, I have begun to study them. Hope when our kids grow up a little, I can show them a far easier way to learn words like chivalry, cavalier, swansong, shrew, outfox, foxtrot, auspicious, ruminate, animation, equanimity, and so on.

In parallel, the command over the language, that continues to improve by the day, helps me to communicate better with my clients and my colleagues. I am experiencing the strong linkage between English language and economic prosperity firsthand. At times, I think that convent educated boys and girls have such a headstart over students from the

vernacular medium. But then, if I were one of the convent types, I wouldn't have asked a waiter to bring me a plate of *à la carte*. Neither would I have ordered a pretty airhostess to serve me 'Red & White' wine. Nor would there be *English Bites*!

14

MY MATERIAL HAS RUN OUT

I am tempted to end *English Bites* with a brief **epilogue.**[1] But, can I truly say that I have reached my goal, when there are still so many words like *avenge–revenge*, *complicity–complexity*, *canto–cantata*, *doodle–doddle*, *deport–disport*, *eerie–eyrie*, *flotsam–jetsam*, *galumph–gazump*, *perspicacity–perspicuity*, *pinion–minion*, *venial–vernal–venal* and *vintage–vantage* that continue to **addle**[2] and **befuddle**[3] me?

Even after spending the last twenty years as a humble servant of the English language, I frequently get stumped by new revelations. How easily had I concluded that *disinterested* is the opposite of *interested* and used it freely in that sense!

[1] **Epilogue** is a concluding part added to a literary work or novel. It also means a speech, usually in verse, delivered by one of the actors at the end of a play: *there was a clever twist in perspective in the epilogue and I had to revise my impression of the book.*

[2] **Addle** is to make or become confused or muddled; to make or become rotten, as eggs: *by this time hunger and weariness had so addled my brain that I could not continue the game of chess.*

[3] **Befuddle** is to confuse, perplex, unable to think clearly: *the question befuddled even the teacher.*

Only recently did someone point out that *disinterested* actually meant unbiased, fair in judgement, dispassionate. Dispassionate! I protest and refuse to accept; for I knew that dispassionate is something or someone *without* passion. How could it ever mean unbiased and fair in judgement?

Thus came the second learning of the day. **Dispassionate** meant devoid of personal feeling or bias and hence used in the sense of being impartial, unbiased, and fair in judgement: *a journalist should be a dispassionate reporter of facts*. Then, what is the opposite of the words *passionate* or *compassionate*? I inquired. It was passionless and unimpassioned, just as *uninterested* is the opposite of *interested*.

With 1.5 billion people speaking some version of English, it is small wonder that it is the fastest growing language in the world. With over 10,00,000 words, English also has the largest vocabulary of all the languages in the world. And this is way beyond the 20,000–40,000 words a fluent speaker would use, or the few thousand you could get by with in daily life.

English also displays constant hunger to stretch its vocabulary lead over other languages. It liberally borrows words and expressions from most other languages, as well as accepts new words created as a result of scientific, social and cultural evolution. This liberal acceptance, hunger and childlike curiosity to make sure that all possible expressions and objects be supported by this language, keeps feeding the challenge in enriching one's vocabulary. This challenge is heightened by the ever-changing meanings of some words, like I discovered when I stumbled upon this interesting piece.

> *'In 1666, a great fire swept through London and destroyed more than half the city, including three-*

fourths of St Paul's Cathedral. Sir Christopher Wren, the original designer of the cathedral and perhaps the finest architect of all times, was commissioned to rebuild this great edifice. He began in 1675 and finished in 1710, a remarkably short period for such a task. When the magnificent edifice was completed, Queen Anne, the reigning monarch, visited the cathedral and told Wren that his work was **awful**, **artificial**, *and* **amusing**. *Sir Christopher, so the story goes, was delighted with the royal compliment, because, in those days* awful *meant* full of awe, awe-inspiring; artificial *meant* artistic; *and* amusing, *from the word 'muse', meant* amazing.'

I hope you agree that this saga will continue and I will discover more interesting anecdotes, stories, observations, trivia and mnemonics to bring out another book for you. I also hope that some of the lessons from my endeavour, in a small way, will help you achieve your aims and objectives.

All the **best**[4] with your language adventure!

[4] **Best** (as a verb) means to get the better of; defeat; beat: *he easily bested his opponent in hand-to-hand combat.*

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My dear friend and engineering college batchmate Avinash Katoch (now a lieutenant colonel in the Indian Army) was an expert on pronunciations and what then appeared to be esoteric words to me. Avinash used to regularly quiz me on my vocabulary and pronunciation and I almost always fell very short of his expectations. That egged me on to work harder to eliminate those deficiencies and, at some stage, level off with my more illustrious and accomplished friend.

One day, it struck me that my fellow brethren, who came from vernacular backgrounds or studied in small towns and **mofussils,**[1] may not be as lucky as I was to meet friends like Avinash who set the benchmark for me and became my mentor. That is why I decided to pass on my learnings through this book.

Since the distance between the goal and where I stood looked considerable, and time stolen from academics

[1] **Mofussil** is an Indian–English term dating from at least the 1800s and used to refer to suburban areas.

veritably[2] **meagre,**[3] my pals in college—Bhupinder Singh Virk, Deepak Jhamb, and Vivek Sharma, who were also part of the 'mofussil club'—collaborated in sharing lists of difficult words, cramming them, and quizzing each other to accelerate this catching up.

In the summer holidays, I would turn to my mom's English teacher, Uma Pandit, and she gladly took upon herself the task of improving the standards of English of her student's **progeny.**[4] She also shared with me her vast collection of *Reader's Digest* magazines (which, incidentally, were gifted to her by Amitabh Bachchan's mother, the late Teji Bachchan, and were autographed by the superstar himself) to go through the articles, especially word lists. Holding a copy of *Reader's Digest* purchased by Amitabh during his days in Calcutta (now Kolkata), was ample motivation for a young lad like me. I am particularly thankful to his mother for having preserved this collection for so long!

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[2] **Veritable** is true, authentic, genuine, real, etc: *a veritable antique.*

[3] **Meagre** means low in quantity or quality, lacking fullness, scanty: *a meagre salary*; *a meagre harvest.*

[4] **Progeny** means a child, an offspring: *his progeny took his small-time venture to a valuation of billions of dollars.*

[5] **Amelioration** means improvement, upgradation, betterment, amendment, etc.: *there are several biologically plausible reasons why zinc may help in ameliorating symptoms of the common cold.*

acted as the **arbiter**[6] where I found myself vacillating between the greed of adding additional text or letting it go. I am indebted to my daughters—to write this book, I have stolen a lot of time that was rightfully theirs.

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[6] **Arbiter** is a person empowered to decide matters, a person who has the sole or absolute power of judging or determining; judge; umpire: *David Johnson has been appointed final arbiter of any disputes by the two contracting parties.*

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